

THE BALFOUR DECLARATION

The Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict

Jonathan Schneer



R A N D O M H O U S E

ALSO BY JONATHAN SCHNEER

Ben Tillett: Portrait of a Labour Leader

Labour's Conscience: The Labour Left, 1945–51

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THE
BALFOUR
DECLARATION

THE ORIGINS OF THE
ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT

JONATHAN SCHNEER



RANDOM HOUSE
NEW YORK

This book is dedicated in loving memory to my parents.

In his indignation Cadmus killed the dragon, and by the advice of Athena sowed its teeth. When they were sown there rose from the ground armed men....

APOLLODORUS 3.4.1

(Transl. J. G. Frazer)

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About the Author

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(These brief notes are meant to provide only the most basic relevant information for those reading this book.)

AARONSOHN, AARON 1876–1919

He gained fame as the foremost agronomist in Palestine before World War I, but is better known for putting his knowledge of the land to use for Britain during the war and for his Zionist activities. He perished in an airplane crash.

ABDULLAH IBN HUSSEIN 1882–1951

Second son of Sharif Hussein, a member of the prewar Ottoman parliament, he helped to instigate and then took a leading role in the Arab Revolt. After the war he became emir of Transjordan, and when the British mandate ended in 1946, he became king of Transjordan and then in 1949 king of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. He died by assassination.

ALI IBN HUSSEIN 1879–1935

First son of Sharif Hussein, he did not play a leading role in the Arab Revolt but nevertheless succeeded his father as king of the Hejaz in 1924, when the Wahhabi rebellion occurred. He abdicated one year later and spent the rest of his life in Baghdad in Iraq, where his brother Feisal ruled as king.

ALLENBY, SIR EDMUND 1861–1936

Promoted to general for his services on the Western Front, he took command of the British-led Egyptian Expeditionary Force in June 1917. His forces captured Gaza in October, Jerusalem in December, and Damascus in October 1918. He served as high commissioner for Egypt from 1919 to 1925.

ASQUITH, HERBERT HENRY

(FIRST EARL OF OXFORD AND ASQUITH) 1852–1928

The Liberal politician who served as prime minister from 1908 to 1916, he led Britain into the war and in May 1915 formed a coalition government with the Conservatives. Lloyd George replaced him as prime minister in December 1916.

AUDA ABU TAYI 1885–1924

The leader of a section of the Howeitat tribe of Bedouin Arabs, he threw his support behind the Arab Revolt and with Lawrence engineered the capture of Aqaba. Lawrence called him “the greatest fighting man in northern Arabia.”

BALFOUR, ARTHUR JAMES (FIRST EARL OF BALFOUR) 1848–1930

The Conservative prime minister from 1902 to 1905, he served on Asquith's war council from the outbreak of hostilities until formation of the coalition government, upon which Asquith appointed him first lord of the Admiralty. When Lloyd George formed the second coalition government, he appointed Balfour to be his foreign secretary. After the war Balfour served the Lloyd George government as lord president of the council.

CAILLARD, SIR VINCENT 1856–1930

A businessman with wide interests and direct experience of Turkey and the Ottoman Middle East, he served as financial director of Vickers armaments manufacturers from 1906 until after the war. In the attempt to arrange a separate peace with the Ottomans, he played the role of intermediary between Basil Zaharoff and David Lloyd George.

CECIL, ROBERT (FIRST VISCOUNT CECIL OF CHELWOOD) 1864–1958

Son of Prime Minister Lord Salisbury, cousin of Arthur Balfour, and himself a Conservative member of Parliament (although a free trader), he joined Asquith's coalition government in 1915 as parliamentary secretary of state for foreign affairs, a post he held for four years. After the war he devoted himself to work for the League of Nations and international peace.

CHEETHAM, SIR MILNE 1869–1938

A career diplomat, after numerous postings he arrived in Cairo as first secretary to the British high commissioner. During the interval between Kitchener's departure in June 1914 and McMahon's arrival in January 1915, he served as acting high commissioner and helped compose an early letter to Grand Sharif Hussein.

CLAYTON, SIR GILBERT 1875–1929

Before the war he served Sir Reginald Wingate, governor general of Sudan, as director of intelligence in Sudan and agent in Cairo. With the outbreak of war he became director of military intelligence at British headquarters in Cairo, head of the Arab Bureau, and eventually chief political officer of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force and military governor of Palestine. After the war he continued to play an active role in Middle Eastern affairs, but his career was cut short by a fatal heart attack.

CURZON, NATHANIEL

(FIRST MARQUESS CURZON OF KEDLESTON) 1859–1925

A Conservative politician who had served as viceroy of India from 1898 to 1905, he joined Asquith's coalition government as lord privy seal in 1915. Lloyd George tapped him for his own coalition government a year and a half later, and for membership of the select War Cabinet, in which he served as lord president of the council. After the war Curzon replaced Balfour as foreign secretary and served until the Labour victory in the general election of 1923.

DJEMAL PASHA 1872–1922

An Ottoman military officer and early supporter of the CUP, he and Enver and Talaat effectively ruled the empire from 1913 until the end of the war. During 1915 and again in 1916 he led the Ottoman Fourth Army in unsuccessful attacks against British forces at Suez. Throughout the war he exercised dictatorial powers in Syria, earning widespread hatred. Afterward he fled to Germany, then to Switzerland, and finally to Central Asia. He was assassinated by an Armenian revolutionary.

ENVER PASHA 1881–1922

An Ottoman military officer and early supporter of the CUP, he was the architect of the triumvirate of three pashas who ruled the empire during 1913–18 and of the government's pro-German policy. During the war he occupied the position of war minister, although he was generally an unsuccessful military leader. With the Ottoman defeat in 1918, he fled first to Germany and eventually to the Soviet Union. An advocate of pan-Turanianism, he died fighting the Russians in Central Asia.

FARUKI, SHARIF MUHAMMAD AL-1891–1920

A young Arab staff officer and member of the secret society al-Ahd, he crossed over to the British lines at Gallipoli, hoping to convince them to support Sharif Hussein's revolt and the Arabian kingdom adumbrated in the Damascus Protocol. He did so, although he did not formally represent al-Ahd. Later he became Sharif Hussein's agent in Cairo.

FEISAL IBN HUSSEIN 1885–1933

Third son of Sharif Hussein, leader and architect of the Arab Revolt, he became king of Syria for about four months in 1920, until the French kicked him out. The British made him king of Iraq in 1921, but they held a mandate to rule from the League of Nations so that Feisal's kingship was qualified. The British granted Iraq nominal independence in 1932.

FITZMAURICE, SIR GERALD 1865–1939

Senior dragoman, or Turkish-speaking consular officer, at the British embassy from 1907 to 1914, an inveterate intriguer with reactionary views, he hated the CUP government and longed unavailingly for restoration of the sultan. During the war he served in naval intelligence, mainly in London.

GASTER, MOSES 1856–1939

The chief rabbi, or *haham*, of Spanish and Portuguese Jews in England, Gaster was a renowned scholar and linguist who played a leading role among British Zionists, but he was an abrasive personality. Eventually Chaim Weizmann elbowed him aside.

GRAHAM, SIR RONALD 1870–1949

A career diplomat, at the beginning of the war he accepted the post of chief staff officer to S

John Maxwell, the general officer commanding troops in Egypt. He returned to London in 1916 to become assistant under secretary of state at the Foreign Office.

GREENBERG, LEOPOLD 1861–1931

An early recruit to Zionism, a prominent figure among British Zionists during the prewar era. Greenberg was the principal shareholder and editor of the London *Jewish Chronicle*. During the war he indirectly introduced Weizmann to Sir Mark Sykes.

GREY, SIR EDWARD (FIRST VISCOUNT GREY OF FALLADON) 1862–1933

A Liberal politician who served as Asquith's foreign secretary, he opposed adding territory to the British Empire. Failing eyesight drove him from his post when Asquith's coalition government fell in December 1916.

HA'AM, AHAD 1856–1927

Asher Ginzberg's pen name means "One of the People" in Hebrew. A leading prewar Zionist essayist and thinker, he was famous for warning that Jews and Arabs in Palestine must learn to cooperate, and for emphasizing the spiritual but not the religious aspect of Judaism. Insofar as Weizmann acknowledged any mentor, Ahad Ha'am was it.

HARDINGE, CHARLES

(FIRST BARON HARDINGE OF PENSHURST) 1858–1944

A career diplomat and prewar viceroy of India, Hardinge favored aggressive military action in Mesopotamia once war began. This led to disaster at Ctesiphon in November 1915 and at Kut-al-Amara in April 1916. He returned to London shortly thereafter, where he served as permanent under secretary of the Foreign Office.

HERBERT, AUBREY 1880–1923

"The man who was Greenmantle," he knew well the Ottoman Empire and its CUP leadership. Despite being nearly blind, he joined the army upon the outbreak of war and was wounded and captured during the retreat from Mons. After his rescue and subsequent recovery, he accepted a posting to Egypt as an intelligence officer, where he came to favor the Arab Revolt. But always he hoped for peace between Britain and the Ottomans, and in 1917 he tried to arrange it.

HOGARTH, DAVID 1862–1927

A renowned archaeologist who served as keeper of the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, during the early stages of the war he shuttled back and forth between London and the Middle East for the department of naval intelligence. From March 1916 Cairo was his permanent base, where he served as unofficial leader of the Arab Bureau. After the war he returned to Oxford.

HUSSEIN IBN ALI 1853–1931

Appointed emir or grand sharif of Mecca by Sultan Abdul Hamid II in 1908, he led the Arab Revolt against the Ottomans beginning in June 1916. Despite his ambition to rule an Arab empire, the Allies recognized him only as king of the Hejaz. This position he abdicated in favor of his son Ali in 1924. A year later they both fled the Wahhabi warriors of Abdul Aziz ibn Saud. He spent the rest of his life in exile.

KITCHENER, FIELD MARSHAL HORATIO (FIRST EARL KITCHENER) 1850–1916

A British soldier statesman, Kitchener served as Asquith's secretary of state for war starting in August 1914. He was the one who initiated wartime contact with Emir Hussein, dangling the possibility of the caliphate before him if he would side with the Allies in the war against the Central Powers. In early June 1916, while en route to Russia, he died when his ship struck a mine.

LAWRENCE, THOMAS EDWARD 1888–1935

Attached to the military intelligence department of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force in 1914, Lawrence eventually made contact with Feisal and soon proved to be a malevolent genius in guerrilla warfare. He left the Middle East thinking that Britain had betrayed the Arab struggle for independence.

LLOYD, GEORGE (FIRST BARON LLOYD) 1879–1941

He traveled the Middle East before the war, overlapping in Constantinople with Aubrey Herbert and Mark Sykes in 1905. In the House of Commons, to which he was elected in 1911, he specialized in imperial matters. Upon the outbreak of war he joined the military intelligence department of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force and wound up working for the Arab Bureau. After the war he would serve as high commissioner in Egypt.

LLOYD GEORGE, DAVID (FIRST EARL OF DWYFOR) 1863–1945

The great Liberal statesman who replaced Asquith as prime minister in December 1916, Lloyd was an "easterner" who sought a way around the Western Front and an entrance into Germany and Austria-Hungary through the Ottoman Empire.

MALCOLM, JAMES 1865–1952

An Armenian in London who represented his country's interests to the British government, Lloyd introduced Weizmann to Mark Sykes and continued during the war years to play a role as intermediary between Zionists and British officials.

MCMAHON, SIR HENRY 1862–1949

A British political officer in India, he replaced Kitchener as high commissioner of Egypt. He carried on the delicate and much-debated correspondence with Emir Hussein that led to the Arab Revolt. At the end of 1916 London replaced him in Cairo with Sir Reginald Wingate.

MILNER, ALFRED (FIRST VISCOUNT MILNER) 1854–1925

A leading British imperialist, he joined the War Cabinet of Lloyd George. He supported the Zionists but also supported a separate peace with the Ottoman Empire that might have left the Turkish flag flying over Jerusalem.

MONTAGU, EDWIN 1879–1924

A Jewish anti-Zionist and Liberal politician with close ties to Asquith, he earned the latter's enmity by joining the Lloyd George coalition government. He led the opposition in the cabinet to the Balfour Declaration, but just before the cabinet came to a final decision, he had to leave to take up a new post as secretary of state for India.

MONTEFIORE, CLAUDE 1858–1938

President of the Anglo-Jewish Association from 1896 to 1921 and an advocate of liberal (denationalized and deritualized) Judaism, he and Lucien Wolf fought hard against the Zionists and to maintain the long-standing connection between the British Foreign Office and advocates of Jewish assimilation.

MORGENTHAU, HENRY 1856–1946

The American ambassador to Turkey from 1913 to 1916, he developed ties to the Ottoman leaders. Early in 1917 he convinced President Wilson to send him to Palestine, where he could speak with responsible Ottomans about a separate peace between Turkey and the Allies. Weizmann headed him off at Gibraltar and convinced him to drop the plan.

MURRAY, GENERAL SIR ARCHIBALD 1860–1945

He took up command of British forces in Egypt in January 1916, defeated an Ottoman attack upon the Suez Canal in August, and advanced into and occupied the Sinai Peninsula. But he twice failed to take Gaza, and the government replaced him in June 1917 with General Allenby.

ORMSBY-GORE, WILLIAM (FOURTH BARON HARLECH) 1885–1964

A Conservative politician, in 1916 he joined the Arab Bureau in Cairo, where Aaron Aaronsohn converted him to Zionism. Recalled to London in 1917, he served as Milner's parliamentary private secretary and later as an assistant secretary to the cabinet, working with Mark Sykes. He knew Weizmann well. After the war he remained active in Conservative politics, eventually rising to colonial secretary in 1936.

PICKTHALL, MARMADUKE 1875–1936

An author of popular novels, many with Middle Eastern themes, he traveled and lived in the Middle East before the war and loved it. He opposed the British declaration of war against the Ottomans in 1914 and never relinquished hope of bringing the two countries into peaceful relations. In 1917 he converted to Islam. Later he wrote the first English translation of the

PICOT, FRANÇOIS GEORGES- 1870–1951

A French diplomat who, with Mark Sykes, redrew the map of the Middle East early in 1916, carving up the Ottoman Empire and basically allocating Syria, including Lebanon, to France and Mesopotamia to Great Britain. When they learned about this agreement, neither the Zionists nor the Arabs were pleased.

ROBERTSON, FIELD MARSHAL SIR WILLIAM 1860–1933

He served during most of the war as chief of the Imperial General Staff. A confirmed “westerner” who thought victory depended upon smashing through the German lines, he opposed those, including Prime Minister Lloyd George, who wanted to strengthen Britain’s military campaign in the East.

ROTHSCHILD, EDMOND DE 1845–1934

A member of the French branch of the famous banking family, he believed in Zionism and supported Chaim Weizmann.

ROTHSCHILD, WALTER (SECOND BARON ROTHSCCHILD) 1868–1937

The oldest son of Baron Nathan Mayer Rothschild, Walter inherited the position of unofficial leader of the British Jewish community upon his father’s death. Although most interested probably, in zoology, Walter Rothschild lent his support to Zionism after falling under Weizmann’s spell. Balfour addressed the famous letter promising British support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine to him.

RUMBOLD, SIR HORACE (NINTH BARONET) 1869–1941

A career diplomat, Rumbold served his country from 1916 to 1919 as envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary to the Swiss Republic. There he kept tabs on agents of foreign powers and ran his own network of agents, including the inestimable Humbert Parodi. He had knowledge of most but not all British attempts to lure Turks into discussions of peace.

SACHER, HARRY 1881–1971

A journalist and Zionist based in Manchester, Sacher provided his friend Chaim Weizmann with the invaluable introduction to his editor at *The Manchester Guardian*, C. P. Scott. He helped to found the iconoclastic British Palestine Committee, which Weizmann sometimes considered to be a thorn in his side. Nevertheless he played a key role in helping Zionists to frame the document that later became the Balfour Declaration.

SAMUEL, HERBERT (FIRST VISCOUNT SAMUEL) 1870–1963

A Liberal politician who rose to become president of the Board of Trade and then home secretary in Asquith’s cabinet, he came from the “Cousinhood” of wealthy assimilated Jewish

Britons, yet secretly nurtured Zionist beliefs. These he revealed to Asquith's cabinet and Weizmann early in the war; later he helped bring Weizmann into contact with other important British officials. After the war he served for five years as Britain's first high commissioner in Palestine.

SCOTT, C. P. 1846–1932

He was the proprietor and editor of Britain's greatest Liberal and radical newspaper, *The Manchester Guardian*. Deeply impressed by Chaim Weizmann, whom he met in November 1914, he introduced the Zionist leader to David Lloyd George and other important Britons.

SOKOLOW, NAHUM 1861–1936

A leading official and representative of the World Zionist Organization, the Polish-born Sokolow spent the war years in London, where he was Weizmann's chief collaborator. At the suggestion of Mark Sykes, with whom he also worked closely, Sokolow traveled to France and Italy during the spring of 1917 and gained support from the governments of those countries for Zionist objectives. He was intimately involved from the Zionist side in the discussions that produced the Balfour Declaration.

STORRS, SIR RONALD 1881–1955

At the outbreak of the war he was serving in Cairo as the British high commissioner's orient secretary. He already knew Sharif Abdullah and was involved in the drafting of the McMahon-Hussein correspondence. Later he joined the Arab Bureau and served as assistant political officer to the Anglo-French mission of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force and as military governor of Jerusalem.

SYKES, SIR MARK (SIXTH BARONET) 1879–1919

Having traveled and written about the Ottoman Empire and the Middle East before the war, he was assigned to the de Bunsen Committee by Kitchener and then sent by him to survey the Middle Eastern scene in person. Sykes negotiated the Sykes-Picot and Tripartite Agreements dividing up the Ottoman Empire. He converted to Zionism and played a crucial role in promoting its leaders. He envisioned a remade Middle East based upon the autonomy of the small nationalities, most particularly Jews, Arabs, and Armenians.

TALAAAT PASHA 1874–1921

A military officer, an early supporter of the CUP, the third member of the triumvirate that ruled the Ottoman Empire during World War I, he became grand vizier (prime minister) in 1917. He kept the door open for talks with Britain about a separate peace and, without informing Enver or Djemal, made more than one overture to the British during 1916–17. He died in Berlin at the hands of an assassin.

WEIZMANN, CHAIM 1874–1952

During the war he became the leading Zionist in Britain and played the crucial role from the Zionist side in fashioning the Zionist-British alliance and the Balfour Declaration.

WILSON, CYRIL 1873–1938

He headed the British mission at Jeddah as “pilgrimage officer” but really supervised the landing of supplies there. More important, he served as British liaison with King Hussein.

WINGATE, SIR FRANCIS REGINALD (FIRST BARONET) 1861–1953

An army officer and colonial governor, during the war he served first as sirdar of the Egyptian army and governor general of Sudan. He favored British support of the Arab Revolt and at the end of 1916 replaced McMahon as high commissioner for Egypt.

WOLF, LUCIEN 1857–1930

A journalist and expert commentator on British foreign affairs, he came to dominate the Conjoint Committee of the Anglo-Jewish Association and Board of Deputies of British Jews. One aim of these bodies, and of Wolf, was to persuade British policy makers to defend and support Jewish interests outside Great Britain. He believed in Jewish assimilation and took a leading role among Jews in Britain who opposed Zionism.

ZAHAROFF, SIR BASIL 1849–1936

Of humble origin, Zaharoff attained great wealth as an arms dealer and rose to membership on the board of directors of the Vickers armaments manufacturer. He played a key role engineering Greek entry into World War I on the side of the Allies and served as David Lloyd George’s emissary to the Ottomans in search of a separate peace.

List of Maps

The Arab Kingdom envisioned in the Damascus Protocol

Territory south and west of the line

Aleppo-Hama-Homs-Damascus ambiguously discussed in the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence

The Levant as divided by Sykes and Picot in 1916

Towns of importance during the Arab Campaign: 1916–17

Postlude as Prelude

LONDON ON DECEMBER 2, 1917:¹ a cold, rainy, windy day: gloomy weather to match British prospects in the stalemated Great War. The Italians had just met a disaster at Caporetto so complete that it seemed likely to take them out of combat altogether. The Russian Bolsheviks, who had seized power in Petrograd the month before, were preparing to negotiate their country's surrender to Germany. On the Western Front the Entente and German forces continued to wreak havoc upon each other with neither end nor breakthrough in sight. But the Germans were gathering for another tremendous offensive, intending to win the war before American troops arrived in sufficient number to tip the balance against them. Somehow Britain and France must summon the resolve and the resources to hang on.

On Kingsway, near the Strand, despite the rain and wind and generally awful war news, a steady stream of beaming men and women poured into the London Opera House. They filled the tiers of boxes, the auditorium, the saloons, lounges, and foyers, even the corridors. The handsome structure, designed to hold 2,700, was filled to capacity and more. People waited outside in the street under their umbrellas. They would not leave.

Inside about a dozen men gathered near the stage. Among them were a former Liberal cabinet minister, Herbert Samuel; the assistant foreign secretary, Robert Cecil; an assistant secretary to the War Cabinet, Sir Mark Sykes; the unofficial head of the British Jewish community, Lord Rothschild; and the two most important leaders of wartime British Zionism, Chaim Weizmann and Nahum Sokolow. They, and all the rest, beamed with pleasure. When finally the doors closed and the crowd settled, Lord Rothschild, hands in his pockets, spoke first to the breathless, happy audience. "We are met on the most momentous occasion in the history of Judaism for the last eighteen hundred years," he began. "We are here to return thanks to His Majesty's government for a declaration which marked an epoch ... For the first time since the dispersion, the Jewish people have received their proper status by the declaration of one of the great Powers."

He referred, of course, to the Balfour Declaration, which the War Cabinet had agreed to one month earlier and published on November 9. By this document the British government pledged "to use their best endeavors to ... [establish] in Palestine ... a national home for the Jewish people."

One by one the men on the stage advanced to speak. One by one they offered thanks and congratulations and rosy predictions for the land to be freed, at long last, from the onerous Turkish yoke. Even an Arab spokesman, Sheikh Ismail Abdul al-Akki, foresaw the day when Palestine would again flow with milk and honey. Everyone said that the Declaration represented a historic gesture on the part of Britain and a historic achievement on the part of Zionism, the culmination of a joint effort that must lead to "Judea for the Jews," as Robert Cecil put it. And because the Declaration also promised that "nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine" they predicted that Jews and Arabs would share the land in harmony.

That last prophecy proved wishful thinking, but events have largely borne out the rest.

Today we consider the Balfour Declaration a great marker in Jewish history, not merely a Zionist victory but a foundation stone of modern Israel. Some of us may know a bit about it. We may have read about the enormous effort, planning, and vision, as well as the unlikely alliances, prejudices, intrigues, and double-dealing, that went into its making. Few if any, however, can know that on the very day that the joyful throng gathered to celebrate at the London Opera House, Britain's prime minister and his agents were engaged in secret maneuverings to detach the Ottoman Empire from the Central Powers. They were offering, among other inducements, that the Turkish flag could continue to fly over Palestine. But the Zionists had long deemed Ottoman rule in Palestine to be one of their chief obstacles. Most of them viewed Turkish suzerainty, no matter how attenuated, as intolerable. Had the Turks accepted Lloyd George's offer, most Zionists, and certainly their most important leaders, would have felt that the British government had compromised, perhaps fatally, its recent pledge. In which case, no one today would pay much attention to the Balfour Declaration at all.

Of those secret dealings, two (or possibly three) men standing on the Opera House stage were well aware. They disapproved because they knew what the Zionist reaction would be but they did not tell. Everyone else at the celebration remained in ignorance. That disparity of knowledge between government officials and the human objects of policy, and its potential for betrayal, encapsulates in a single moment the tortuous process that had led to the Balfour Declaration—and nearly to its swift negation. The meeting at the London Opera House on December 2 crystallized a convoluted history that too often has been conceived as an irresistible forward march. This book will show that the lead-up to the Balfour Declaration was anything but a simple triumphal progress. And since intrigue and double-dealing as much as bravery and vision were of its essence, the Balfour Declaration resulted not merely in celebration and congratulation but soon enough in disillusionment, distrust, and resentment. Nearly a century later these bitter emotions remain; compounded over the years, they continue tragically, bloodily, to unwind.

PART I

Sirocco

Palestine Before World War I

THE LAND CALLED PALESTINE gave no indication, early in the twentieth century, that it would become the world's cockpit. Rather, if anything, the reverse. A century ago it was merely a strip of territory running along the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea. The remote, sleepy, backward, sparsely populated southwestern bit of Syria was still home to foxes, jackals, hyenas, wildcats, wolves, even cheetahs and leopards in its most unsettled parts. Loosely governed from Jerusalem in the south and from Beirut in the north by agents of the Ottoman Empire, Palestine's borders were vague. To the east it merged with the Jordanian plateau, to the south with the Arabian deserts, and to the north with the gray mountain masses of Lebanon. And it was small:¹ Fewer than two hundred miles long and fifty miles wide, it was not much bigger than present-day Massachusetts (to put it in an American context) and about the size of Wales (to put it in the British).

The strip of land, resting mainly upon limestone, was devoid of coal, iron, copper, silver, or gold deposits and lacked oil, but it was happily porous ("calcareous," the geologists said, meaning that it was capable of absorbing moisture whenever the heavens should open, which they might do, especially when the wind came from the north. When it came from the east, however, as it frequently did in May and October, the wind was a malign enervating force. It was a furnace-blast sirocco in hot weather and a numbing chill in cold. The two mountain ranges that ran in rough parallel the length of the country from north to south could not block it. The western range, which includes "the Mount of the Amorites" of the Book of Deuteronomy, runs between the Jordan Valley (to its east) and the maritime plain (to its west). The eastern edge of this range is an escarpment that drops (precipitously in places) to the fabled Jordan River below. The second or eastern range of hills, which includes the mountains of Moab, Judea, and Galilee, is a continuation of a chain that begins in Lebanon and reaches southward into Jordan. To its west lies the river valley; to its east is a desert plateau. In the north of the country the mountains are quite tall: Mount Hermon rises more than 9,200 feet above sea level. (People ski there in winter now.) To the south the mountains are typically half as high, and the surrounding landscape is bleak, empty, and inhospitable.

For such a tiny land, Palestine contains extraordinary topographical contrasts. The Jordan River runs southward along a descending valley floor, passing some seventy miles from the clear waters of the Sea of Galilee, where the surrounding hills and fields are relatively green, welcoming, and fruitful. It empties into the brackish bitter Dead Sea, thirteen hundred feet below sea level, where the landscape is barren, freezing during winter, broiling in summer. In the Dead Sea area the Jordan Valley has never been cultivated, although at the turn of the twentieth century the wandering Bedouins might camp there. Even they, however, would move on during the hottest months, when temperatures scale 120 degrees Fahrenheit or higher and the land opens in cracks and fissures.

Elsewhere in Palestine, however, life flourished. "It drinketh of the rain of heaven," Mos

is supposed to have said of his “Promised Land,” and although it did not drink deep (rainfall averaged 28 to 32 inches annually, except in the south, where 6 inches marked a good year) and it rarely drank at all from March until November, nevertheless it drank sufficiently. Parts of the country were nearly luxuriant. In 1869 even that American innocent abroad, Samuel Clemens, whose wonderfully dyspeptic view of Palestine is legendary, could refer without irony to groves of lemon trees, “cool, shady, hung² with fruit,” by the village of Shunem near “Little Hermon,” and to “breezy glades of thorn and oak,” south of the Sea of Galilee near Mount Tabor. A horseman riding³ the Hauran plateau, east of the eastern mountain range could view unbroken wheat fields extending to the horizon on every side. A British visitor to the Circassian village of Gerasa was reminded “of a Scotch glen,⁴ though the hills are not so high nor the land so barren.” Local markets sold a diverse range of fruits and vegetables, some of remarkable size. “We have cauliflowers that measure at least a foot across, and watermelons hardly to be spanned by a grown person’s arms ... grapes in clusters from three to four feet in length ... We have in their season [also] ... apricots, nectarines, plums, damsons, quince, mulberries, figs, lemons, oranges, prickly pear, pomegranates and many kinds of nuts.” In spring the countryside (some of it) ran riot with wildflowers—“anemones ... hyacinths, ranunculus, narcissus, honeysuckle, daisies, buttercups, cistus.” The writer lists a dozen additional varieties and claims to have seen “many more whose names elude me now.” Such reports may have been exaggerated—other European visitors⁶ insisted the land was no cornucopia. But one hundred years ago the countryside was far from being a wasteland.

As many as 700,000 people lived there then, although figures vary and are imprecise. Many were descended from the Canaanites or Philistines (who gave the land its name) or from the Arabs, even from the ancient Hebrews. They spoke Arabic, and most of them may be termed Arabs, although commonly only nomadic Bedouins were referred to as “pure” Arabs. The majority were Sunni Muslims, who accepted the caliphs as Muhammad’s legitimate successors, but some were Shiite Muslims, who believed that Ali, son-in-law of Muhammad, originated the true line of succession. There were as well Druze and other Christians, some of them European or of European descent, and Jews, some of whom were also European transplants or of European origin. Flocks of Christian tourists, thousands every year, came to visit the holy land, and even greater numbers of Muslim pilgrims passed through on the annual trek to Mecca.

Of the total permanent population, only a tiny fraction were rich. This fortunate minority derived their wealth in one way or another from ownership of land, but they resided in the largest towns; their well-appointed large brick houses were whitewashed with lime and built around courtyards. The middle class, composed of well-to-do bankers, merchants, and clerics as well as a handful of professionals and local traders, lived more modestly in the towns and villages, in stone houses well adapted for keeping out the heat of the sun. The vast majority of the inhabitants, however, were poor. Many lived in tiny isolated villages, set on hilltops within high walls, a reminder of the times, not long past, when safety demanded such protection from Bedouin marauders. In northern and central Palestine the typical village home was a square mud-plastered, whitewashed hut one story high with a straw roof. In the south it was a rough straw shelter or, for the semi-nomads based there part of the year, merely a tent. Inside these dwellings one might see only a few mats, baskets, a sheepskin

and some earthenware and wooden vessels.

Most villagers were fellahin, peasants. Within the village walls they sometimes worked gardens or orchards or vineyards, for themselves or for their more wealthy neighbors; more commonly, they worked in the surrounding fields and pastures as sharecroppers for one of the great landowning families; or for the imperial Turkish state, which owned or controlled much Palestinian land; or for the villages themselves, since some villages owned land and periodically allocated it to residents for cultivation under a system called *musha*. Outside the walls were impressed by the fellah's industry. "He abominates absence from his fields," observed one. And the fellah had a reputation for generosity, "such as his poverty⁷ allows."

Outside the towns and villages Bedouin nomads roamed ceaselessly, oblivious to boundaries and borders that, anyway, were vague to all. These "dwellers in the open land" or "people of the tent" as they called themselves, were the "pure Arabs" romanticized by certain Europeans for their swashbuckling behavior, independence, and egalitarianism. Divided among clans and tribes who occasionally made ritualistic and not very bloody wars upon one another, the Bedouins might prey upon caravans and travelers, whom they viewed as fair game unless protected by previous agreement with a local sheikh, in which case the traveler's safety was inviolate. But robbery was only an interlude; mainly the Bedouin tribes wandered the countryside with their camels, sheep, goats, and donkeys in more or less regular patterns and rhythms according to the weather and needs of their livestock. Their material possessions were few. Their tents were little more than a few coverings of coarse goat or camel hair dyed black and spread over two or more small poles; on striking camp they could quickly load their few possessions onto their beasts. When on the move,⁸ Bedouin tribes tended to skirt villages and to give towns an even wider berth. But this was a recent development: Within living memory Bedouins had raided them periodically.

Among the large towns of Palestine, Jerusalem was biggest and most important, containing sites holy to Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike. In 1911 its 60,000 inhabitants included 7,000 Muslims, 9,000 Christians, and 40,000 Jews. The city stood on a rocky plateau, 2,500 feet above sea level, overlooking hills and valleys except to the east, where the Mount of Olives looms 200 feet higher still. Peering down from that perch to the city below, one would have seen timber and red tiles among the vaulted white stone roofs of the more ancient structures: These hotels, hospices, hospitals, and schools were mainly the work of Christian missions embarked upon building programs. A pharmacy and a café opened at the Jaffa Gate and in 1901 a clock tower and fountain were added. According to one visitor, the new structures displayed a "striking want of beauty,⁹ grandeur and harmony with the environment." Meanwhile Jerusalem had¹⁰ begun to overspill its ancient and massive walls. Now perhaps half the total population lived outside, in suburbs, of which Karl Baedeker, author of the famous guidebooks, deemed the Jaffa quarter most salubrious.

Overall, however, it was "a dirty town," as T. E. Lawrence observed. "The streets are unpaved¹¹ and crooked, many of them being blind alleys, and are excessively dirty after rain," sniffed Baedeker. Just before World War I the regime in Constantinople began to make improvements, but rubbish heaps continued to choke the alleyways, many cisterns were polluted, and dust thickened the air. As a result, typhoid, smallpox, diphtheria, and other epidemics remained common. But at least Jerusalem's provincialism was diminishing: Aft

1892 it connected with its port, Jaffa, by a paved road and a French-worked railway. Carriage roads extended to Bethlehem, Hebron, and Jericho. Christian tourists and, in season, as many as fifteen thousand Mecca-bound Muslim pilgrims clogged its streets. Residents did brisk business selling supplies, services, and trinkets typically of olive wood and mother-of-pearl. Local artisans were known for their work in tin and copper; skilled stonemasons were essential to the burgeoning building trade.

To the south of Jerusalem, the most significant towns were Gaza and Hebron; Beersheba with only about eight hundred residents, was practically deserted by 1914. To the north and west, Nablus was a significant trading center: The fastidious Baedeker deemed its inhabitants “fanatical and quarrelsome.”¹² To the north and east stood Jericho, of whose residents Baedeker wrote, “They usually crowd¹³ round travelers with offers to execute a ‘*Fantasia*,’ a dance, accompanied by singing, both of which are tiresome. The performers clap their own or each other’s hands, and improvise verses in a monotonous tone.” Farther up the coast lay Haifa, at the foot of Mount Carmel, at the southern end of the Bay of Acre. The best natural harbor on the Palestine coast, it increasingly overshadowed the older port, Acre, located at the northern end of the bay. A commercial hub, it connected by rail to Damascus.

Since 1517 Palestine had been governed more or less despotically by the sultans of the Ottoman Empire, which had been named for a Turkish Muslim warrior, Osman, whose followers were known as *Osmanliler* or Ottomans; the sultans made Constantinople the capital. When they conquered Arabia, they wrested the caliphate from the last survivor of the Abbasid line and made Constantinople its seat too. The two positions merged, and the sway of the caliph (or Prince of the Faithful) extended ostensibly to wherever Sunni Muslims might live, while the sway of the sultan extended, at its height, west and north through the Balkans all the way to Hungary; east into southern Ukraine, Georgia, and Armenia; south along the eastern and southern coasts of the Mediterranean Sea all the way to Algeria; and southeast all the way to Iraq and the Persian Gulf. Then the empire began to contract: The tsars of Russia nibbled from one direction, the Habsburgs of Austria from another. During the nineteenth century more or less successful independence movements developed in the Balkans.

For centuries the sultans paid little attention to Palestine, but during the nineteenth century conditions there slowly improved. Ottoman leaders realized they must modernize or perish in the hands of Russia or one of the great European powers. They instituted a program called Tanzimat (literally “reorganization”), which meant modernization in administration and land tenure, among other things. The classic period of Tanzimat was 1839–76, but the last sultan of the nineteenth century, Abdul Hamid II (reigned 1876–1909), continued parts of it for longer. Abdul Hamid II was infamous for autocracy and brutality, employing many thousands of agents to spy upon his subjects; nevertheless, he favored the construction of roads, railways, schools, and hospitals throughout his dominions, and in Palestine, they led to increased domestic and external trade and to rising living standards for a fortunate few. The so-called Young Turks¹⁴ of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) who brought his reign to a generally un lamented end during 1908–09 continued the modernizing policies.

Wealthy and middle-class Palestinians benefited most from these improvements. Increasingly cosmopolitan, they commonly adopted European dress and were more aware of

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