

DOMINIQUE TRIMBUR

Introduction II

History in Fast Motion: An Overview

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The occurrences in Palestine in the years 1840 and 1948 are reflective of the region's development generally: at the beginning came the "invention of the Holy Land"¹ and at the end the foundation of the state of Israel. Both events convulsed the area in a lasting way and ensured its place at the center of the international arena. In 1840, the region belonged to the Ottoman Empire, thus enjoying political unity. At that time, there was as yet no partition among different states, a situation that first came about immediately after the Second World War. Freedom of travel between the various provinces was relatively great, though the first signs of fragmentation were already present.

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, outside intervention in the area had increased. Following the expedition of Bonaparte to Egypt and the incursion into Palestine (1799), the European interest and presence there grew, also as a consequence of the policy of openness pursued by the Egyptians, who controlled the region between 1830 and 1840. In this respect, the Egyptian approach clearly differed from the earlier Ottoman policy of sealing the area off from the outside world, whereby Palestine was somewhat forgotten.²

*I. 1840–1914: The period of "modernization"*³

For the period after 1840 one can observe a renaissance that embodied both Romanticism and the religious awakening that shaped Europe after the confusions of revolution. It was the beginning of an era of disquiet and an ex-

¹ Henry LAURENS, *La question de Palestine*, Bd. 1: 1799–1922. *L'invention de la Terre Sainte* (Paris 1999); Bd. 2: 1922–1948. *Une mission sacrée de civilisation* (Paris 2002).

² See Yehoshua BEN-ARIEH, *The Rediscovery of the Holy Land in the Nineteenth Century* (Jerusalem 1983).

³ For this period, see Dominique TRIMBUR, Ran AARONSOHN (Hgg.), *De Bonaparte à Balfour. La France, l'Europe occidentale et la Palestine 1799–1917* (Paris 2001, 2008).

pression of the “meeting” between Occident and Orient.⁴ The positive interpretation of events would imply that this “meeting” breathed life back into the Orient, which had almost disappeared from view after the Crusades. The negative reading would mean that the Occident tried in this way to force a European order on the Orient.⁵ For the Romantic, this development could not remain one-sided in that by approaching the Orient, the Occident itself revived.⁶

But the conjunction occurred not only in the ideal domain, but also through the growing competitive claims of the great powers also in the areas of politics and geopolitics. In this connection the “Oriental Question” emerged, producing movement in two directions. On the one hand, a wave of modernization took place in the Ottoman Empire that was partly provoked by pressure from European powers aiming to improve the situation of those under their protection, especially the groups of Christians and Jews trapped in the status of political minorities. On the other hand, the changes proceeding from these reforms led to reaction by conservative circles at the Porte.

The reforms doubtless ensured the endurance of the Ottoman Empire, but their effects proved ambivalent⁷ given that the empire weakened itself in its effort to survive. The period under consideration here was marked by the strengthening of centrifugal political and ethnic forces that the Porte tried to play off against each other in order to reduce the risk of collapse. These forces cultivated contacts to the European powers, which in their turn used them to secure firmer positions within the empire. These positions were in some cases more symbolic in character; in others, however, they yielded concrete results. Thus, thanks to treaties of “capitulation,” the first of which had been concluded in the sixteenth century, France exercised a protectorate over the Christians. This circumstance led France to consider itself entitled in 1860 to take action in Lebanese affairs. Violent confessional excesses led to French “humanitarian” intervention in favour of the Maronites. The affair brought about a

⁴ See Dominique TRIMBUR (Hg.), *Europäer in der Levante. Zwischen Politik, Wissenschaft und Religion (19.–20. Jahrhundert)/Des Européens au Levant. Entre politique, science et religion (XIX^e–XX^e siècles)* (Pariser Historische Studien 53, München 2004).

⁵ See Heinz GOLLWITZER, *Deutsche Palästinafahrten des 19. Jahrhunderts als Glaubens- und Bildungserlebnis*, in: Bernhard BISCHOFF u. a. (Hgg.), *Lebenskräfte in der abendländischen Geistesgeschichte. Dank- und Erinnerungsgabe an Walter GOETZ zum 80. Geburtstag am 11. November 1947 dargebracht* (Marburg/Lahn 1948) 286–324; Edward SAID, *Orientalism* (New York 1979).

⁶ See Jean-Claude BERCHET (Hg.), *Le voyage en Orient. Anthologie des voyageurs français dans le Levant au XIX^e siècle* (Paris 1985).

⁷ See also Gudrun KRÄMER, *Geschichte des Islam* (München 2007) 275 f.

new autonomous status for Lebanon. While the Protestant English supported the non-Latin and non-Uniate Christians, the Russians protected the Orthodox populations, especially from abuse by the Greek clergy that had formal religious jurisdiction over them.

This epoch saw the establishment and extension of zones of influence by foreign powers, which nevertheless took care not to accelerate the break-up of the Ottoman Empire. Their goals were the exercise of influence and the “liberation” of the population through the imposition of civilization from outside that aimed at restoring former greatness. This exertion of influence proceeded, especially in Syria, through economic interests, or, as in symbolically important Palestine, through a dense network of religious and charitable institutions controlled by one or other of the great powers/confessions.

National ambitions of local populations manifested themselves especially at the end of the nineteenth century. On the one hand, strong efforts at self-assertion came from the Arabs, who resisted attempts by the authoritarian Porte to develop a common Ottoman identity. Arab nationalism found the support of the British, who played with the idea of an Arab kingdom. In this respect, the French did not rank behind the British, as the program of a “Syrian Congress” organized with the help of the French authorities and held in Paris in 1913 shows. Nostalgia for a greater Arab kingdom thereby played a central role.

On the other hand, Zionism became increasingly important in the late nineteenth century. This national movement appeared at first in practical form in connection with the initial waves of immigration after 1882; later it acquired its theoretical foundation through the works of Theodor Herzl (most importantly *Der Judenstaat*, 1896), the Zionist congresses starting in 1897, and finally, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the elaboration of concrete plans for the foundation of a Jewish state.⁸ Jewish nationalism, which several European states (Great Britain and Germany) looked upon with tacit or explicit approval, produced disquiet among the Arabs. This state of affairs strengthened the Turkish central authorities in Constantinople, who rejected the idea of a Jewish state, and corresponded with the intentions of the Young Turkish Revolution of 1908. The constant uncertainty of the situation led in turn to increasingly strident Arab demands.

⁸ See Georges BENSOUSSAN, *Une histoire intellectuelle et politique du sionisme 1860–1949* (Paris 2002).

II. 1914–1922: The First World War as Final Break

The First World War decisively determined the political development of the Near East; its consequences are still to be felt. On the basis of a secret German-Turkish military treaty (2 August 1914), the Ottoman Empire entered the war on the side of the Central Powers in November of that year. The Porte thus gave up the neutrality on which France and Great Britain had counted. A new front opened up that was at first very active, but then stabilized and hindered a British advance into Palestine from the Sinai.

This unexpected situation forced the pace of events.⁹ Clergy (members of religious orders) who came originally from Entente countries were expelled;¹⁰ excesses and massacres were perpetrated against the Christian populations; and attempts to do the same were made against the Jews, who were suspected of collaborating with the Entente states. The outbreak of the war also led to more intensive consideration of what was to happen to the region generally. Great Britain showed itself prepared to make the most diverse promises, all of which assumed the break-up of the Ottoman Empire. These promises were made to both Arabs and Zionists: the political undertakings to Sharif Hussein led to an Arab insurrection against the Turkish-proclaimed *Jihad* with the aim of establishing an Arab kingdom. On the other hand, the British convinced themselves of the importance of Zionism and thereupon promised the erection of a “national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine (“Balfour Declaration,” 2 November 1917).

France more or less followed the British approach, though traditional French interests were not ignored. To be sure, the “déclaration Cambon” of 4 June 1917 preceded the “Balfour Declaration” by several months; but on the same day, France expressed worry about the Vatican’s attitude regarding perpetuation of its centuries-old protectorate.¹¹ In the end, the latter proved much more important to France than Zionist concerns, which were probably only supported for opportunistic reasons. France’s principal focus remained the creation of a greater Lebanon for the protection of the Christians, as well as the

⁹ See Conde de BALLOBAR, *Diario de Jerusalén (1914–1919)*. Edición, introducción y notas de Eduardo MANZANO MORENO (Madrid 1996).

¹⁰ See Dominique TRIMBUR, *Le destin des institutions chrétiennes européennes de Jérusalem pendant la Première Guerre mondiale*, in: *Mélanges de Science Religieuse*, Université catholique de Lille, 4 (octobre–décembre 2001) 3–29.

¹¹ See Dominique TRIMBUR, *Une lecture politique de la mission pour l’Union: la France et la mise en place de la Sacrée Congrégation Orientale, 1917–1922*, in: Chantal PAISANT (Hg.), *La mission en textes et en image* (Paris 2004).

idea of a “greater Syria.” In the eyes of its French partisans, such a Syria would incorporate Palestine as its southernmost part.

The two Entente powers reached agreement about the division of the territory in the Sykes-Picot Treaty of May 1916. At the same, the French and English recognized Italian interests in the region, while the Russians hoped to realize the old tsarist dream of annexing Constantinople and thus re-establishing the Byzantine Empire.

The Central Powers, Germany and Austria-Hungary, tried on their part to use their position as allies of the Ottoman Empire to satisfy longstanding ambitions. Thanks to their concrete military presence in the region in support of the Ottomans, they endeavoured to implement far-reaching plans that would have permitted them a decisive say in Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish affairs. The German parliamentarian of the Catholic Center Party, Matthias Erzberger, travelled to Palestine in 1916 and spoke of buying the Holy Places in order to present them to the pope. In 1917, the Austrian Archduke Hubert Salvator – like many members of the House of Habsburg before him – undertook a trip to the region on behalf of the war ministry. He travelled with Alois Musil, an enigmatic Catholic priest and Orientalist from Moravia with close ties to the Austrian imperial family. Beyond these demarches, both powers also promised late support (end of 1917/beginning of 1918) for the Zionist project, which was to be realized within a re-constituted Ottoman Empire. At the same time, they plotted subversion action against the English on behalf of the Arabs. This was yet another initiative of the above-mentioned Musil. The various plans of the great powers for the Near East merely accelerated the spread of nationalist thinking among the populations there.

At the beginning of December 1917, the Allies conquered the city of Jerusalem. This event put an end to 400 years of Ottoman rule, which was replaced by English domination. A British administration, at first of a military character under Marshal Allenby that took little account of French traditions in the region, was established. This was followed by a civil administration under the High Commissioner Herbert Samuel.

III. 1922–1948: *The Period of the Mandate*¹²

Parallel to the international conferences that settled the fates of Germany and Austria-Hungary, a series of meetings focussed on the Ottoman Empire took place. These (Sèvres and San Remo 1920) were either a direct consequence of the Turkish defeat or a reaction (Lausanne 1923) to the military operations undertaken by Mustafa Kemal.

The negotiations sealed the division of greater Syria into several parts, to be distributed among the victorious powers as mandated territories under the aegis of the League of Nations. The League charged the mandate power Great Britain with the task of bringing about Palestinian political autonomy. Given that the populations there were considered already politically developed, independence was expected to follow as soon as possible. For the historian, on the other hand, the question arises as to whether the device of mandate administration had not been chosen in order to cover up colonial-political interests. Great Britain could in fact point to the League of Nations in realizing what had been its war aims. But national feeling in the area and its strengthening as a reaction to the rule and plans of the mandate power immediately brought about problems. The nationalities that lived within the mandate tried to accelerate the prospect of full independence. The Jews, for instance, built up proper state-like structures.

New inter-ethnic unrest was the result: violent clashes between Jews and Arabs, both Christian and Muslim, occurred beginning in 1920. It was not acceptable to the Arabs that a foreign great power – Great Britain – endeavoured to impose a future on them that they did not want, especially as it involved the perspective of the land's occupation by what was in their eyes an alien population, Zionist Jews. Under these circumstances, the mandate power reacted as a colonial power. A cycle of excesses and repression was put in train and a spiral of violence established that would never leave the region. Confronted with the steady expansion of ethnic conflict, Great Britain repeatedly resorted to violence, as in 1920 in response to the incidents during *Nebi Musa*-celebration; in 1929 on the occasion of the massacre of Hebron; and between 1936 and

¹² For the Period of the Mandate, see for instance Tom SEGEV, *One Palestine, Complete. Jews and Arabs under the British Mandate* (New York 2000); Ilan PAPPE, *A History of Modern Palestine. One Land, Two Peoples* (Cambridge 2004); Linda SCHATKOWSKI SCHILCHER, Claus SCHARF (Hgg.), *Der Nahe Osten in der Zwischenkriegszeit 1919–1939. Die Interdependenz von Politik, Wirtschaft und Ideologie* (Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Europäische Geschichte Mainz, Beiheft 22, Stuttgart 1989); Dominique TRIMBUR, Ran AARONSOHN (Hgg.), *De Balfour à Ben Gourion. Les puissances européennes et la Palestine 1917–1948* (Paris 2008).

1939 during the large, Arab-organized strike that paralyzed the economic life of the mandate.

However, repression was only one facet of the reaction by the mandate power to the increase in opposing demands. The repeated clashes ultimately brought about the search for a *modus vivendi*. Thus, London sent several fact-finding commissions to the area, usually as a direct result of incidents and excesses. These bodies filed a wide variety of reports containing suggestions about how the clashes could be ended. The recommendations often contradicted each other, though. Most such reports had a shelf-life of only a few months or even weeks and all of them emphasized preparations for state-independence, which meant a return to the principles of the mandate charter.

Given the deterioration of the situation and the increasingly manifest impossibility of a peaceful solution, the Peel Commission recommended in 1937 the partition of Palestine with the creation of two separate states, one Jewish, the other Arab, and a special status for the city of Jerusalem. Although this report offered an actual possibility of a solution, the recommendation was not implemented because of the opposition it provoked in the region itself. This failure resulted in renewed excesses. Because of the intractable situation, Great Britain altered its policy with the “White Paper” of 1939 by almost ending Jewish immigration, which appeared to be at the root of Arab violence.

During the mandate period, other countries also made their presence felt and invested in the future of Palestine. Several rivals, it is true, withdrew from the field, including Russia, whose Orthodox claims had become obsolete following military defeat and the victory of communism. And Austria-Hungary’s Catholic ambitions ended with the collapse of the Dual Monarchy. In contrast, Germany’s economic presence in the region remained unbroken and she gradually returned to the region, opting – on the basis of the connection between Zionism and German values that characterized the movement founded by Herzl and carried on by German Jews – primarily for cultural engagement. After 1933, however, the anti-Semitism propagated by Hitler’s Germany determined the attitude of the National Socialists toward what was perceived to be an increasingly Jewish Palestine. On the one hand, there was an agreement with the Zionists to promote not only the emigration of German Jews, but also German trade; on the other hand, solidarity developed with the Arabs in the region with respect to the joint struggle against a Jewish state and British power in the Near East. Pre-occupied with extending its so-called *Lebensraum* on the European continent, National Socialist Germany had no clear ideas concerning the Mediterranean area. Only in the Second World War did the pro-Arab

option gain the upper hand, too late for Berlin to play any meaningful role there.¹³

Fascist Italy in turn used all available means to extend its influence and in this respect continued traditional Italian policy in the Levant. The goal was to maintain or increase the traditional presence in the Catholic missions and institutions, thereby displacing France. Italy supported the Zionists in their national aims, primarily because the movement founded by Herzl offered an additional way of accommodating Italian colonial ambitions in the eastern Mediterranean and thwarting British objectives. For the same reason, Mussolini supported Arab national demands directed at the mandate power.¹⁴

IV. The Second World War and its Consequences

Following the especially turbulent interwar period, the years of the Second World War were paradoxically tantamount to a “pause” in political agitation – the lack of especially violent actions differed significantly from the radicalization of the previous years. The opponents of the British mandate, Germany and Italy, defined their thinking more clearly without, however, being able to jeopardize British rule.

This was in much greater danger after the end of the Second World War. The new era saw the re-appearance and acceleration of the extant and unsolved problems from the interwar period, almost as if the disruption during the war had brought about an even more dramatic radicalization. The violent excesses resumed immediately after the end of the war. On the one hand, these occurred between Jews and Arabs; on the other hand, they were directed at the mandate power itself, for example with the attack on the British administration at the King David Hotel in July 1946.

In this situation, in which the British position became ever more unsustainable, the United States offered a way out: under their aegis, the United Nations as the successor organization to the League of Nations was charged with the matter. This development led in November 1947 to an internationally sanctioned proposal for the division of Palestine that had the same modalities as the Peel plan of 1937. In this way, London was able to rid itself of its grave respon-

¹³ See Francis R. NICOSIA, *The Third Reich and the Palestine Question* (Austin 1985); Yehuda BAUER, *Jews for Sale? Nazi-Jewish Negotiations 1933–1945* (New Haven 1994).

¹⁴ See Renzo De FELICE, *Il Facismo e l’Oriente. Arabi, Ebrei e Indiani nella politica di Mussolini* (Bologna 1988).

sibility and an ungovernable territory; on 15 May 1948, the British government announced the abandonment of the mandate. Even before the last British soldier had left the region, the Zionists in the person of David Ben-Gurion proclaimed the creation of a Jewish state that was to encompass the Jewish areas defined in the plan of division. On the following day, the Arab states declared war on the new entity.¹⁵

¹⁵ See Benny MORRIS, 1948. A History of the First Arab-Israeli War (New Haven 2008).

