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Background of the Middle East Conflict, Part 2

by Wendy McElroy

The Arabs would not have fought so bravely had they known of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which had been signed by the Entente in May of 1916. In essence, the Agreement divided the Middle East between Britain and France. When the Arabs *did* learn of the agreement, they were incensed and sent out feelers to their recent enemy, the Turks. But most Arabs still distrusted the Turks more than the British and negotiations fell through.

The armistice of November 11, 1918, ended both World War I and the Ottoman power over Arab lands west of the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. The Arabs were free from the Turks ... but would they be independent?

World War I abounded in secret agreements through which two or more parties were promised the same stretch of land or political advantage. In backroom deals, another agreement regarding Palestine had been forged. Britain had been aware of the advantages of international Jewish goodwill during the war. The Balfour Declaration of 1917 was a letter written by British Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour to Lord Rothschild that read,

I have much pleasure in conveying to you on behalf of His Majesty's Government the following declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations, which has been submitted to and approved by the Cabinet:

“His Majesty's Government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.”

The British tried to reassure the now-enraged Arabs by issuing a joint message with the French that stated,

The object aimed at by France and Great Britain ... is the complete and definite emancipation of the peoples so long oppressed by the Turks and the establishment of national governments and administrations deriving their authority from the initiative and free choice of the indigenous populations.

Thus the Middle East settled into a rivalry between the Arabs and the Zionists, the British and the French, with both of the latter determined to share in Middle Eastern oil.

The American president, Woodrow Wilson, soon threw up a barrier to their plans. After World War I, he promoted his famous “Fourteen Points.” They expressed the democratic principles for which Wilson believed the United States had been fighting, including the principle of sovereignty. The Arabs were encouraged; other Entente powers were annoyed.

The Americans established the King-Crane Commission to analyze disputes in the Middle East. In 1919, it reported,

If the wishes of Palestine’s population are to be decisive as to what is to be done with Palestine, then it is to be remembered that the non-Jewish population of Palestine — nearly nine-tenths of the whole — are emphatically against the entire Zionist program.

The King-Crane Commission was ignored.

In 1920, the newly formed League of Nations established what was called the British Mandate; that is, it commissioned Britain to administer Palestine; France acquired Syria and Lebanon. Sir Herbert Samuel — significantly, a Zionist and a Jew — was appointed High Commissioner for Palestine. The Arabs rioted; the British crushed the revolt; the Jews organized the *Haganah*, or Self-Defense, which was a militia for defending Jewish settlements.

But Arab nationalism was on the rise. Syria was almost constantly in a state of revolt for independence. In Arabia, Ibn Saud was beginning the conquests that would make him king of a renamed nation: Saudi Arabia. The American diplomat John Foster Dulles, later secretary of state, acknowledged,

The U.S. must regard Arab nationalism as a flood which is running strongly. We cannot successfully oppose it, but we could put sand bags around positions we must protect — the first groups being Israel and Lebanon and the second being the oil positions around the Persian Gulf.

In 1922, Winston Churchill, then secretary of the Colonial Office, declared in a Statement of Policy,

The terms of the [Balfour] Declaration referred to do not contemplate that Palestine as a whole should be converted into a Jewish national Home but that such a Home should be founded in Palestine.

Churchill's Statement of Policy also stirred controversy by denying that the British and Arabs had any prior understanding or deal concerning Palestine. Even Sir Henry McMahon denied there had been a deal.

(Decades later a secret document entitled "Memorandum on British Commitments to King Hussein" was declassified. The memo had been prepared by the Political Intelligence Department of the British Foreign Service. It confirmed the commitment of "His Majesty's Government" embodied in an October 24, 1915, letter written by McMahon to the sheriff.)

In 1922, Britain went beyond its Mandate and created the Emirate of Transjordan by severing land from Palestine; the League Nations registered no comment.

U.S. postwar foreign policy

Meanwhile, in America, the new president, Warren Harding, solemnly promised in his inaugural speech that the United States would seek "no part in directing the destinies of the world." This was a period of isolationism during which immigration was restricted, tariffs were raised, and domestic politics were emphasized. In 1923, the new president, Calvin Coolidge, declared, "The business of America is business." The next president, Herbert Hoover, continued this theme.

When Americans did look abroad, it was with suspicion. The Soviet Union had emerged from World War I as a major power, with leader Vladimir Ilich Lenin openly declaring his goal of world communism. The new Bolshevik government issued an appeal entitled "To All the Toiling Moslems":

The rule of the robbers, who have enslaved the peoples of the world, is falling. A new world is being born, a world of workers and of freed people. Russia is not alone in this sacred cause. The peoples of Europe, exhausted by war, are already stretching out their hands to us. And faraway India has already raised the banner of insurrection, calling the peoples of the East to struggle and liberation.

This post-World War I era is known as "The Red Scare."

Jewish settlers in Palestine

By 1929, 156,000 Jewish settlers were in Palestine — approximately double the number of ten years before. These settlers owned approximately 4 percent of Palestine but about 14 percent of all agricultural land. How they acquired the land was a point of bitter contention. Absentee landlords had long held title to many villages where Palestinians had lived, worked, and died for

generations. Zionists purchased the villages from the absentee landlords and evicted the inhabitants.

Arab farmers who had worked that land for generations were dispossessed and unemployed. They flocked to the cities for work but, there, Jews owned most of the industries and they had a policy of not hiring Arabs. When an Arab could find work, he was paid less than a Jew. This became the first Palestinian population to live in refugee camps and they became the breeding ground of the *fedayeen* fighters — *fedayee* meaning “one who sacrifices himself.”

As Arab unemployment soared, violence erupted. The American journalist Vincent Sheehan reported on the riots of 1929:

Although I had spent a good part of life amid scenes of violence and was no stranger to the sight of blood and dying men, I had never overcome my loathing for the spectacle even when it seemed compelled by historical necessity. But here in this miserable little country, I could see no historical necessity whatsoever.

Arab bitterness burned; the Zionists continued to arm; the British created commissions of inquiry. The Shaw Commission and the Hope-Simpson Royal Commission both recommended that Jewish immigration and land purchases be restricted. The recommendations were ignored.

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