ISRAEL/PALESTINE

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First published in 2005 by Polity Press

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK.

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

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ISBN: 0-7456-3203-3

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 10.5 on 12 pt Sabon
by SNP Best-set Typesetter Ltd., Hong Kong
printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall

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This book is dedicated to

SANDRA WINICUR

Strength and honor are her clothing, and she shall rejoice in time to come. She opens her mouth with wisdom, and in her tongue is the law of kindness.

Proverbs 31: 25–6
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Preface

Can an introduction to the highly charged Arab–Israel conflict be “objective” and yet communicate the depth of emotions and humanity on both sides? Perhaps the goal is hopelessly naïve, as modern theories of knowledge have repeatedly claimed; indeed, the very concept of objectivity has in recent decades been subjected to relentless attack. Yet it is precisely in the discussion of hotly contested issues, where it is hardest to achieve, that the subject refuses to go away. Perhaps it is an unachievable goal, but in my view that does not relieve us as scholars from the responsibility of trying to approach it as much as we possibly can.

The approach I have followed in this introduction to the clash between Israelis and Palestinians is to present the opposed perspectives in their full intensity, leaving readers to think through the claims and counterclaims for themselves. The analysis follows a conceptual framework that emphasizes the various approaches to resolution of the conflict.

The book assumes no previous knowledge on the part of the reader. It covers the basic features of the confrontation with a strong historical emphasis, since the very vocabulary of the conflict requires historical knowledge (The text is followed by a chronology, as well as suggestions for further reading and Internet links.) But within this framework, it focuses on larger developments such as changing public attitudes on both sides, rather than the details of forgotten diplomatic episodes.
As with other books in the Polity “Hot Spots in Global Politics” series, the aim is “to chart the origins and evolution of the conflict, to explore the different motivations and claims of those groups involved, and to discuss the prospects for resolution.”

I am grateful to Louise Knight and her fellow editors at Polity for their confidence and support at all stages, and to Jean van Altena for her superb copy-editing. Since this book draws on the accumulated wisdom, such as is, of over 40 years of academic and personal involvement in the conflict, it would be pointlessly tedious to try to mention everyone who has had some influence, direct or indirect, on the content of these pages. I will simply mention those who read all or part of the manuscript and made useful suggestions, which I probably should have used more extensively: Sandra Winicur (as usual, my closest reader), Phil Mikesell, David Freeman. Gail, my life’s partner, was as always a tower of strength upon which I could lean at any time.

However, 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 easily yield their place . . .

Zionist leader Ahad Ha’am (Ginzberg 1891: 162)

Dispelling Myths

The conflict over Israel/Palestine may be the quintessential “hot spot” on today’s globe. Even the label attached to it is contentious. If we call it a conflict over “Israel,” Palestinian or Arab observers would consider that a Zionist or pro-Israel framework. By the same token, calling it a conflict over “Palestine” favors the definition and terminology of anti-Zionist critics of Israel. I will, therefore, use both labels, depending on whose viewpoint is onstage, and also employ the somewhat awkward compromise of “Israel/Palestine.”

There is another problem with the label. Although the clash between Israelis and Palestinian Arabs is the core of the conflict, the involvement of neighboring Arab states after the emergence of Israel in 1948 expanded the confrontation into an “Arab–Israeli” conflict. Before then, Jews (they were not yet Israelis) contended with Arabs within British-ruled Palestine, a Mandate of the League of Nations, and Arab states
played secondary roles. The label “Arab–Israeli conflict” is still more common, even though Palestinians have reclaimed their previous position as Israel’s major antagonists, and Arab states have to some extent disengaged (Egypt and Jordan have signed peace treaties with Israel). Given this re-emergence of the core conflict and the Palestinians as core actors, we will focus on “Israel/Palestine,” while not overlooking the historical importance and current role of Arab nations.

By any label, the Arab–Israeli conflict (or Israel’s fight for existence, or the Palestine question) is often described as the bloodiest, or one of the bloodiest, battlegrounds in today’s world. Pundits speak about “age-old ethnic hatreds” between Arabs and Jews going back “thousands of years,” about the “clash of religions” between Islam and Judaism that lies at the center of these hatreds, and about the “unceasing cycle of violence” that fuels the hatreds and intensifies the conflict, making it an “unending and insoluble” dilemma.

There is a major problem with these characterizations. They are all myths.

- This is not an “age-old” conflict. Its origins lie in the 1880s, when Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe began settling in the historical Land of Israel (Eretz Yisrael), then a part of the Turkish Ottoman Empire, in order to re-establish a Jewish presence there. The broader Arab–Israeli dimension came into full existence only with the 1947–9 war.
- This is not a conflict caused by ethnic hatreds. For one thing, the ethnic identity of the existing population in Eretz Yisrael/Filastin as Arabs or as Palestinians was only beginning to emerge in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the assertion of this identity came more in reaction to conflict with Jewish settlers than as a cause of it. For that matter, the assertion that Jews constitute an ethnic group as well as a religion – an assertion that was necessary in order to stake out a territorial claim in the “national homeland” – was a relatively new, and not yet universally accepted, idea among Jews. Clearly mutual hatred between Jews and Arabs has grown apace over the course of the conflict, and it has much in common with patterns of ethnic conflict elsewhere (I will return to this issue). But historically, Jewish minorities generally fared better among Arab populations than in most European states.
- This is not a conflict rooted in a “clash of religions.” To be sure, as the conflict developed, it created religious issues, and the religious dimension has become increasingly important. But Judaism is a non-proselytizing religion that accepts Islam as a legitimate monotheistic faith, while Islam regards Jews and Christians as “People of the Book” or dhimmī (protected people) who, while not having equal status with Muslims, are regarded as part of a common tradition and are given freedom to practice their own religions. Again, the position of Jews in Muslim (including Arab) societies was generally better than their position in Christian states; they were subject to certain restrictions, but within this framework were generally secure from arbitrary persecution (Lewis 1984). The same could not be said in Europe, at least during the more turbulent periods. If Jews fleeing the pogroms (racial massacres) of late nineteenth-century Tsarist Russia had entered the Ottoman Empire seeking no more than the right to live as a minority practicing its own religion, there would have been no Arab–Israeli conflict.
- Finally – though this is more arguable – this is not a conflict of unceasing violence, nor are there compelling grounds for pronouncing it “insoluble.” During the century and a quarter of its existence, the struggle between Jews/Israelis and Arabs/Palestinians has undergone several key transformations in intensity and scope. Along with periods of dramatic and explosive violence, there have been periods of relative stability and quiet. There has been continued economic interaction. In terms of loss of human life, the Arab–Israel conflict is far from the “bloodiest” conflict of the last century; it is dwarfed not only by general wars such as the two World Wars, but also by other ethnic conflicts that have involved the slaughter of entire populations.
Seeing the conflict in this long-range perspective also provides the best evidence that it is not, in fact, insoluble. We see that the violence is not constant; there must be, therefore, some conditions under which the two sides exercise restraint. This is not simply an irrational eruption of hatred and hostility. In fact, measured over time – and contrary to the popular image – the gap between mainstream opinion on the two sides is narrower now than at any previous moment. To show this, we must look at the broad historical picture, which will follow this introduction.

**Defining the Conflict**

The Israel/Palestine issue is not, then, age-old; it is not a result of long-standing antipathies between Arab and Jew, is not (at least originally) about religious differences, and is less unremittingly and hopelessly violent than its public image would indicate. This clears away some common misunderstandings. But how, then, do we define and characterize this dramatic clash that has seized the world’s attention?

*The core of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is the claim of two peoples to the same piece of land.* Stripped of other layers and dimensions added over the years, it was and is a clash between a Jewish national movement (Zionism) seeking to establish a Jewish state in Eretz Yisrael – the historic Land of Israel – and an Arab/Palestinian national movement defining the same territory as Filastin (Palestine) and regarding it as an integral part of the Arab world. Supporters of Israel would prefer to define the core issue in somewhat different language; they argue that the basic cause of the conflict is the refusal of Palestinians and other Arabs to acknowledge the existence and legitimacy of a Jewish state in the historic Jewish homeland. Arabs define the core issue as the violation of the natural right of the Palestinian people to self-determination in its ancestral homeland. But these two opposed formulations both actually confirm the basic definition above; stripped of the advocacy of their own answers, both agree that this is a question of conflicting claims to the same territory.

This hardly makes Israel/Palestine a unique case. Nations and groups within nations fight over territory as often as anything. But in contrast to most other territorial conflicts, the claims overlap totally in this case. By most definitions Eretz Yisrael and Filastin are the same exact piece of land, delineated conveniently (if fairly recently) by the borders set for the British Mandate of Palestine after World War I. So long as both sides claim all of it, the loser faces the threat of being left stateless. Just as two objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time, so two sovereign states cannot govern the same territory at the same time. Without territorial compromise, this becomes what game theorists call a zero-sum game: whatever one side gains comes at the expense of the other (gains and losses thus total zero). There is no potential “win–win” outcome where both sides gain. It is a situation of total conflict, with no incentives for cooperation or negotiation.

A fight over territory is a “real” conflict, in the sense that it is not simply a result of emotions, misunderstandings, misperceptions, and other human imperfections. Even if all hostile thoughts and emotions could be eliminated, the question would remain: Who gets what? This brings us to a basic distinction that is critical in analyzing international conflicts. Objective sources of conflict, like territory, can be thought of as “givens”: they exist independently of our thoughts and feelings, and by their very existence they create differences of interest among us. Not only land, but all forms of wealth and material resources raise the issue of “who gets what.” The same is true of intangible assets such as political power and national security; just as there is not enough wealth to satisfy everyone’s potential demands, the ability of some to determine public policy means that those with conflicting policy goals will be dissatisfied. Land, wealth, and power are all “scarce goods”; a conflict of interest exists because it is impossible to meet all demands, and we need a political process to decide who gets what. Among states, the issue of security plays out in a similar way, since measures that make one state feel more secure (arms buildups, territorial gains, alliances, intervention) makes other states feel less secure.
This is known as the security dilemma, and it explains why frictions and conflict among states are not necessarily a sign that their leaders are simply being obtuse and unreasonable.

Emphasis on objective sources of conflict is characteristic of those who stress rational behavior and focus on “interests” in the analysis of politics, domestic or international, such as the “realist” school of thought. When different interests are created by the fact that not all demands can be met, pursuit of one’s own interest is hardly irrational. It is no more remarkable than the expectation that, in the marketplace, sellers will press for the highest price and buyers will look for the lowest. Of course the assumption of rationality as a guideline does not mean that all conflict is, in fact, over such “real” issues; nor does it eliminate the possibility that human beings, even when they are trying to do the “rational” thing, do not often make horrendous mistakes and miscalculations. Nevertheless, and despite such reservations, to the extent that conflicts are “objective” there are certain expectations about the behavior of the parties involved. In the first place, there should be less expectation that the conflict can be eliminated completely, since no amount of goodwill can offset the fact that something real is at stake and that each side will emerge with either less or more of it. On the other hand, since the two parties are presumably acting on the basis of interest rather than emotion or doctrine, there is greater hope for a cooperative or compromise solution — especially since, in the real world, conflicts are rarely “zero-sum,” and a “win-win” outcome is usually possible.

This is important in the Israeli/Palestinian case. The core issue — land — is a real issue in which a rational negotiated solution, such as partition, is theoretically possible. Chapter 4 will take up this thread of thought. But in the meantime we need to look at other, non-objective, conflict patterns, which may not have been critical in the origins of this conflict but which have clearly developed over time as a result of it. What is not objective is, by definition, subjective: produced by the mind, feelings, or temperament of the subject. This includes ideas and ideologies, perceptions and misperceptions, cultural and societal biases, emotions and passions — in short, the whole spectrum of mental activity. Theoretically, conflicts rooted in subjective thoughts and feelings should be more soluble, since they do not necessarily correspond to a “real” conflict of interest. Misunderstandings, passions, and distrust are in a sense artificial; since they are creations of our minds, our minds can also erase them. But, by the same token, they may be less responsive to a self-interested bargaining process, since they are not the result of a “rational” process. Are “irrational” hatreds or distrusts necessarily easier to resolve than conflicts of interest? It seems that aggressive ideas or emotions, or even simple distrust, can sometimes drive combatants into a “lose-lose” outcome, damaging their presumed interests.

Subjective sources of conflict are a natural focus for behavioral scientists who study the psychological, cultural, and societal aspects of human behavior. Scholars and practitioners in the field of conflict resolution, and “normative” or “idealistic” theorists who advocate the strengthening of international law and morality, also tend to emphasize subjective factors such as misunderstanding or misperception, since they reject the idea that conflict is natural and inevitable, and since these flaws are in theory correctable. Questions from this perspective include such issues as: What is the image of “the enemy”? What is the perception of the other side’s aims and methods? How do fear and insecurity influence attitudes and behavior? Do participants understand the impact of their own actions on the other side? As we shall see, these questions are all relevant to the Israeli/Palestinian impasse. Thus, while we begin with an objective core issue (land), we will also pay close attention to the ways in which Israelis and Palestinians perceive and express their respective positions, beginning with the Jewish and Arab backgrounds in chapters 2 and 3 respectively.

This is important because, while Israelis and Palestinians have a territorial conflict, it is not a run-of-the-mill territorial conflict, and it is not only a territorial conflict. Jewish and Arab national movements emerged in the context of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century nationalism. In recent years nationalism and nationalist conflicts are usually
subsumed in the broader category of ethnicity and ethnic conflict, given the flood of ethnic quarrels that broke out following the end of the Cold War.

Ethnic groups, in Max Weber’s classic definition, are those human groups that share “a subjective belief in their common descent... whether or not an objective blood relationship exists” (Weber 1968: 389). In other words, what is important is self-identification as members of a particular group, whatever the historical basis for that identification (this is particularly important in the Israeli/Palestinian case, where identities have changed over time and have often been challenged by the other side as lacking a historical foundation). In more recent work the definition of an “ethnic group” has been understood broadly to include groups differentiated by color, language, religion, nationality, shared culture or history, or simply a shared consciousness (Horowitz 1985: 53; Stavenhagen 1996: 4-5).

By such standards both Jews and Arabs qualify as “ethnic groups,” and their conflict can be categorized as an “ethnic conflict.” But the vast majority of ethnic conflicts in the world today (233 by one count) take place within nation-states, not between them, and they center on questions of minority rights, civic equality, power sharing, and autonomy (Gurr 1993). There are aspects of the Arab-Israeli conflict that fit this pattern: the problem of Arab citizens of Israel (about 19 percent of the Israeli population) and the fate of remaining Jewish minorities in some Arab states. Israel’s clash with Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (Palestinian areas that Israel has occupied since 1967) does not fit this pattern, since Israel has not annexed these areas. Legally the West Bank and Gaza fall under the international law of wartime occupation, and thus somewhere between an internal and an interstate conflict. In addition, during long periods of time (especially 1948–67) the interstate dimensions of the conflict (Israel versus Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon) dominated the Israeli/Palestinian core.

It makes better sense, then, to consider this conflict as a “nationalist” conflict within the broader ethnic conflict spectrum, and to look back to the context of emerging nationalism in which its origins lie. “National” conflicts might be defined as clashes involving groups that claim not only an ethnic identity but also the collective political right of national self-determination in their own independent sovereign state. In the second half of the nineteenth century the idea of national self-determination and the nation-state as the basic unit of world politics swept over Europe as group after group discovered, or rediscovered, its identity as a “nation” entitled to statehood. In some cases (Germany, Italy) this led to unification of existing states, while in others (Greece, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria) it sparked movements for secession from existing multinational empires.

The nationalist spirit of the times made its mark on both Jews and Arabs. A vast majority of the world’s Jews lived in Europe at this time, over half of them in Tsarist Russia (which then included most of Poland). The idea of a Jewish nation-state had tremendous positive appeal, given the long Jewish history of statelessness. But Jews were also pushed toward this option by two seemingly contradictory threats. The first, felt more in Western Europe, was the fear that liberalization and extension of civic equality to Jews would lead to massive assimilation and threaten Jewish survival. The second, stronger in Eastern Europe, was that nationalism actually made life more precarious for remaining minorities; emerging nationalist governments celebrated their newly affirmed identities by tyrannizing those who did not share it. The last two decades of the 1800s were scarred by waves of anti-Jewish persecution that threatened simple physical survival. These pressures on the Jewish community will be explored more fully in chapter 2.

Arab populations in the Middle East were also becoming aware of the new winds blowing out of Europe. Most lived in the Ottoman Empire, which had for two centuries been vainly resisting the loss of territory to European powers and the expansion of European influence within its borders. During the nineteenth century the Christian provinces of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans, one by one, liberated themselves from Turkish rule and proclaimed their own nation-states: Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania. Arab intellectuals
grasped the potential power of nationalism as a mobilizing and unifying force that could restore the Arab world to its grandeur of past centuries, countering both the stagnation of the Ottoman Empire and the threat from European states that seemed to believe that self-determination applied only in Europe. These currents in the Arab world, and in Palestine in particular, will be traced more fully in chapter 3.

Out of this emerged both Jewish and Arab national movements. In an age when others were rediscovering or inventing their own national identities, nationalist Jews (Zionists) felt that by virtue of their 3,500-year history as a people with a distinct identity, culture, religion, history, and language, their claim to national rights was as solid as any. In fact Jews possessed many of the attributes of a “nation,” in the modern sense, long before modern nationalism came onto the scene. Yet in one respect Jews were certainly not a conventional “nation” in nineteenth-century Europe: they lacked a defined territorial base. They were a minority in every European nation, and no state or region on that continent could be claimed as an ancestral homeland. This claim could only be on another continent and across two millennia of history.

Palestinian/Arab nationalism was also anomalous in one important respect. Was it Palestinian nationalism or Arab nationalism, or both? The answer has implications for the response to Zionism. Was Jewish immigration into Palestine the major issue, or was it merely one problem among many? In the early days there was even talk of Arab nationalist–Zionist cooperation against European imperialism: Arabs would concede one corner of their vast domain to the Zionists in return for Jewish support for liberation of the rest. The first Arab nationalists, who appeared in Beirut and Damascus around the turn of the twentieth century, had a pan-Arab focus, calling for the unification of all Arabic-speaking peoples. But in the first decade of the new century the word Filastin also made its appearance as a political, and not just a geographic, term within what was to become the Palestinian Arab community. In the decades to come, the pendulum was to swing back and forth between the two poles of identity, depending on the situation in Palestine and, even more, on trends in the broader Arab world.

Yet while Jewish and Palestinian/Arab nationalism both had unusual features, they also had striking parallels to each other. Both involved a Semitic people with roots in antiquity and a long history as a coherent political community. Both peoples looked back to a “golden age” that inspired efforts to restore the position they had once enjoyed. Both felt challenged in one way or another by European modernization and penetration, viewing it as a threat to their identity, and both reacted by turning to an idea that, although itself European in origin, could be turned to their own defense: the idea of national self-determination (Tessler 1994: 2–4).

So far we have seen that Israel/Palestine is a territorial conflict, though one with some unique features. It is also a nationalist conflict, or a conflict between two national movements, though once again one with unique features. There is a third category that is often seen as relevant, and once again the case at hand is not typical of conflicts in that category. This is the category of colonialist conflicts, involving the establishment of settlements in foreign lands with the intent of expanding one’s own culture and influence. A recent variant is Thomas G. Mitchell’s characterization of Israel/Palestine as a “settler conflict,” defined as “conflict between a settler population, which was part of a colonization effort, and a native population, which was resisting the colonizing enterprise” (Mitchell 2000: 1). Many elements of this picture fit: Jewish settlers from Europe did enter Palestine in order to establish a new community not based on the existing culture there, and—living in an age when few questioned the superiority of European culture—they believed that their presence would bring the benefits of a more advanced civilization to the native population. From the Palestinian perspective, the uninvited intrusion of European Jewish settlers is part and parcel of the overall penetration of European influence and culture into the Middle East, and cannot be understood outside that context. The Jewish settlers even referred to themselves as “colonists.”
However, there was no home country whose interests or specific culture was tied to the enterprise; the settlers received some help from particular powers, but never saw themselves as agents of those powers. In their minds they were re-establishing a Jewish homeland that would, above all, be independent; that was a core element of Zionist thinking. They did not even come from a single home country, but from many; in addition, before 1948 they had no control over the territory in which they settled, and made no effort to rule over the native population (Penslar 2003: 84–98). In sum, since they were not acting on behalf of any colonial power, it is more accurate to characterize their settlement as "colonization" rather than "colonialism."

The Setting: Ottoman Palestine

There was another sense in which the Jewish settlers in late nineteenth-century Ottoman Palestine were not typical colonizers: the land of their dreams was anything but prime colonial territory. Apart from the hostility they faced from both government and populace, the Palestinian provinces of the Ottoman Empire were poor in resources, economic potential, and strategic importance. It would have been hard to locate a more unpromising focus for colonial ambitions. Eretz Yisrael/Filastin was rich only in history, as the birthplace of monotheism and the three monotheistic world faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

For the Hebrew tribes who spent 40 years in the wastes of the Sinai desert, the biblical Land of Israel may have seemed to be “flowing with milk and honey.” Visitors to the same area in the 1800s came away with a different impression. Arid, bleak, and uninviting, the landscape is described as a desolate backwater within a larger stagnant Ottoman state and society. Visiting in 1867, Mark Twain exclaimed: “Of all the lands there are for dismal scenery, I think Palestine must be the prince. . . . It is a hopeless, dreary, heart-broken land” (Twain 1974: 606). The southern half of what became Palestine was the Negev Desert, essentially a continuation of the Sinai Desert. The northern half was divided geographically into three north-to-south zones: a coastal plain, much of it marshy and malarial, which was considered unhealthy and had a sparse population; a central hilly region that, despite its arid and stony appearance, contained most of the cultivable land and most of the population, and the Jordan valley from the ridge of the hills to the river, which received almost no rainfall and thus had few settlements apart from an occasional oasis such as Jericho. Splitting through the central hilly range in the north was the Jezre’el Valley, connecting the coastal plain to the Sea of Galilee, with hot and often marshy conditions similar to both of those areas. The Jordan River, the conventional modern eastern border of Eretz Yisrael/Filastin, is already below sea level where it enters and leaves the Sea of Galilee; by the time it reaches the Dead Sea in the south, it marks the lowest spot on earth and one of the most desolate.

The three Ottoman districts corresponding to modern Palestine had, according to adjusted Ottoman records, a total population of 462,465 in 1881–2, on the eve of the first new wave of Jewish immigration. Of this number, 403,795 (87 percent) were Muslim, 43,659 (10 percent) were Christian, and 15,011 (3 percent) were Jews (McCarthy 1990: 10). Nearly all the Muslims, and the vast majority of the Christians, were Arab in language and culture. Since many Jewish residents were not Ottoman citizens, other scholars put the Jewish total at 20,000–25,000 (Ben-Aryeh 1989–90: 78). But whatever the total number, Jews still constituted a small percentage of the population at this time. The Jewish population was almost totally urban, concentrated in the holy cities of Jerusalem, Hebron, Safed, and Tiberias, and very religiously traditional in its way of life.

As a whole, however, the population was still largely rural and agrarian; in 1890, it is estimated, the population of the three provinces was 67 percent rural (though only 6 percent of Jews lived in rural areas) (Bachi 1974: 32).

The picture of stagnation in Ottoman Palestine needs to be qualified. The nineteenth century was a period of dramatic change in the Middle East, and the Ottoman government was
reacting to enormous internal and external challenges with serious efforts of reform and renewal. In the middle of the century it embarked on a broad program of reform – the Tanzimat – designed to strengthen its own authority throughout the Empire. In Palestinian areas this brought about greater security in the countryside, better transport and communication, and increased attention to maintaining the loyalty of the Arab population to Constantinople (Divine 1994: 107–35). While the 1881–2 population may still have been less than half a million, this was almost double the population of 275,000 in 1800 (Bachi 1974: 32). While the region may have appeared technologically backward to European eyes, significant changes were taking place.

The “Holy Land,” that area made familiar to Western civilization by the Christian Bible, had, except during the Crusades, been under Muslim rule since 638 CE. The Ottomans, a Turkish dynasty founded by the first Sultan, Osman, at the end of the thirteenth century, conquered the area along with Syria and Egypt in 1516–17. Based in western Anatolia, the Ottomans had conquered Constantinople (today’s Istanbul) in 1453 and made it their capital, and embarked on campaigns of expansion that brought most of the Muslim world, and many other areas, under their control.

The Turks came from Central Asia, speaking a language unrelated to either Indo-European tongues (such as Persian) or Semitic languages (such as Arabic and Hebrew). When the early Arab conquests brought Islam within reach, they (like the Persians) became Muslims, adopted the Arabic alphabet for their own language, and became a part of the extensive multicultural World of Islam (dar al-islam). The Turks were known as formidable warriors, which led Arab Muslim rulers, beginning in the ninth century, to begin importing Turkish slaves for service as soldiers. The “slaves” soon became a privileged military caste, and within two centuries translated their military command into a political domination that lasted for almost 1,000 years. The Ottomans were preceded by other Turkish dynasties – the Seljuks, the Mamluks – and over time, the division of labor between Turks, as commanders and rulers, and Arabs, as religious and cultural leaders, became the standard pattern (Lewis 1963).

At its peak, in the seventeenth century, Ottoman rule stretched from the borders of Morocco in the west, across North Africa and the Arabian peninsula, to the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf in the east, and in the north included most of southeastern Europe and the north shore of the Black Sea. Twice (in 1529 and 1683) Ottoman armies laid siege to Vienna. The Ottoman ruler was not only Sultan of the Empire, but was also generally recognized as Caliph (khalifa), successor to Muhammad as leader of all Muslims, which translated into influence beyond Ottoman borders. For two centuries the military might of “the terrible Turk” was the nightmare of Europe, while the Ottoman regime was also known for “its thriving economy, its meticulous government, and its rich and brilliant culture” (Lewis 1963: 33).

But the legendary grandeur of the first two centuries was matched by an equally legendary decline during the two centuries that followed. In the words of Bernard Lewis, “if the first ten Sultans of the house of Osman astonish us with the spectacle of a series of able and intelligent men rare if not unique in the annals of dynastic succession, the remainder of the rulers of that line provides an even more astonishing series of incompetents, degenerates, and misfits” (Lewis 1968: 22–3). Prior to the second attack on Vienna, the Sultan’s forces had seldom suffered defeat; from that time forward, they seldom tasted victory. By the time Zionism appeared on the scene, the Ottoman Empire had lost half its territory to a combination of Western imperialism and nationalist unrest. War with Russia was almost constant; by 1917 the two autocratic empires had fought over a dozen times, with the Russians seizing all Ottoman territories north and east of the Black Sea. North African territories, ruled by Constantinople through local dynasties, were lost in the course of the nineteenth century, with France claiming Algeria (1830) and Tunisia (1881) and Great Britain occupying Egypt in 1882 (in 1912 Italy completed the sweep by annexing Tripoli and Benghazi, present-day Libya). The British, who had earlier protected the Ottomans against other European powers, also
established a dominant presence in Aden (present-day Yemen) and the Persian Gulf.

Finally, the Ottoman Empire lost most of its European territories. Austria took Hungary, Croatia, and Transylvania in the eighteenth century. In the century that followed, the non-Muslim nationalities in the Balkans managed to win their independence from “the yoke of the Turk”: Greece in 1830, Serbia and Romania in 1878, Bulgaria in 1905. In the Balkan Wars of 1911–12, even Muslim Albania emerged as a new nation, and the Ottomans were left with a bare toehold in Europe, around Constantinople itself.

But the loss of territory is not the entire story. The declining Ottoman regime, no longer a match for European armies that had surpassed it technologically, was also threatened by broader Western economic, cultural, and political penetration. In 1798 Napoleon invaded Egypt as part of France’s war with Great Britain, advancing as far as Acre on the “Palestinian” coast. His campaign was not only a military embarrassment for the Ottoman defenders, but also brought with it an influx of Western economic, scientific, and political influences that, within a few years, made deep inroads in Egypt and elsewhere (providing the basis for a regime in Cairo, under one Muhammad Ali, that later threatened Constantinople itself). Western penetration took many forms, but one that Ottoman authorities found particularly humiliating was the practice of “Capitulations” under which European nations exercised judicial powers in the heart of Ottoman territory.

The Capitulations were actually introduced as a result of one of the more tolerant aspects of Ottoman (and earlier Muslim) tradition, under which recognized non-Muslim minorities (Christians and Jews) were allowed to settle disputes within their own communities according to their own religious traditions. The Ottoman government had willingly agreed, for example, to allow French representatives to handle legal issues among French Catholics within the Empire’s borders. But as Ottoman power declined, the demands of European states grew more intrusive, with competing powers using these extraterritorial rights to increase their own influence and block their rivals inside Ottoman territory. France sought the right to protect all Catholics, and Russia posed as guardian of all Orthodox Christians, while Britain and Prussia (later Germany) competed for the Protestants. Russia’s claim of the right to intervene on behalf of all Orthodox Christians, Russian or not, throughout Ottoman territory, was a major cause of the 1853–6 Crimean War, when Britain and France defended the Turks against overbearing Russian demands (Isaiah Friedman 1986: 280–93). By this time, of course, Ottoman authorities were determined to eliminate the Capitulations entirely.

The issue was especially sensitive in the “Palestinian” provinces. Since the Crusades, Jerusalem had been closed to European diplomats, and foreign non-Muslims had no right of permanent residence there. Only when Muhammad Ali of Egypt controlled the city were the first European consuls allowed in Jerusalem, beginning with Britain in 1838, and the hostility to Europeans was still such that at first the consuls moved about the city only with an armed escort, and no open display of Christian or Jewish symbols was allowed. After the Crimean War the Ottoman government, having been rescued by Britain and France, was compelled to issue an edict extending legal equality and non-discrimination to non-Muslims throughout the Empire. This of course strengthened the hand of foreign consuls acting on behalf of those whom they protected.

In this context, Ottoman authorities were hardly likely to welcome the immigration of European Jews able to claim the protection of the country of origin. Ironically, the Ottoman Empire had traditionally been open to Jewish refugees; it took pride in having offered a haven to those expelled from Spain in 1492. But earlier refugees had settled throughout the Empire, and those who did choose the Palestinian provinces did so as individuals, not as an organized movement; they also assimilated into Arab culture and became Ottoman citizens. The Muslim tradition of religious tolerance accommodated this easily. European Jewish immigrants in the nineteenth century were another matter. Even before the rise of Zionism, Ottoman officials had developed an aversion to
European Jews who clung to their foreign citizenship, invoked the protection of their consul, and showed no inclination to assimilate. Furthermore, foreign consuls were actually competing for the right to represent Jewish immigrants; for a time Great Britain claimed the right to protect Russian Jews, since the Russian government had hardly bothered to protect them even when they were still in Russia.

As indicated, while there was no internal division within the Ottoman Empire corresponding to historical Eretz Yisrael/Filastin, there was a particular sensitivity with regard to Jerusalem and the areas associated with it historically. The Ottoman administrative borders went through many changes; in 1864–71 the area corresponding to historic Palestine was made part of a province (vilayet) ruled from Damascus, consistent with a tendency to designate the entire region as part of Syria. But after the first wave of Jewish immigration had sensitized Constantinople, in 1888 the Jerusalem area (corresponding to the southern half of Palestine) was constituted as a separate district (mutasarriflik) under direct rule from Constantinople. The northern half of contemporary Palestine was divided into two districts (sanjaqs), centered in Nablus (Shechem) and Acre, both of which were part of the Beirut vilayet (see Map 1).

In short, the Ottoman government, in these final decades of its existence, was fighting a rearguard action against foreign penetration and internal disintegration. It feared the European powers that had reduced its power both externally and internally; only by exploiting the splits among these powers had the Ottomans managed to survive such crises as the challenge from Muhammad Ali’s Egypt and the Crimean War during the tumultuous nineteenth century. The creation of a new, Western-oriented, non-Muslim minority in the Ottoman heartland, and precisely in an area of particular sensitivity in the long struggle between Islam and the West going back to the Crusades, was simply out of the question. With the loss of its European possessions, the Arabs were – apart from the Turks themselves – the last remaining bastion of the Empire. Ottoman authorities could not fail to be solicitous toward the concerns of their fellow Muslims.
But would Arabs also be infected by the nationalist fever emanating from the West? This had not been an issue in the past; the dominant identities within the Empire were religion, clan, tribe, and family. Only toward the end of the nineteenth century were voices heard calling for Arab liberation from Turkish rule, on the basis of a rediscovered identity as members of an Arab-speaking nation stretching from Morocco to Iraq. The first glimmers came in the late 1870s, when a secret society (with 22 members) in Beirut, Damascus, Tripoli, and Sidon (in present-day Lebanon and Syria) posted placards denouncing the evils of Turkish rule and calling for an Arab uprising against it (Antonius 1946: 79–80).

However, before these ideas reached the Palestinian areas of the Ottoman Empire, they had already reached the Jews of Tsarist Russia and had evoked a thunderous echo.

As long as in the inner heart a Jewish soul still beats, and toward the Near East an eye still searches, our hope is not lost; the hope of two thousand years, to be a free people in our own land, the land of Zion and Jerusalem.

Hatikvah (The Hope) – Israeli national anthem written by Naftali Herz Imber, 1878

A Fossilized Relic?

Both Jews and Arabs have long and proud histories. The conflict between them may be comparatively recent, but to understand it, we must consider each side’s historical traditions and memories. This chapter traces the Jewish historical experience, in its full intensity, and then takes a closer look at Jewish perspectives and prospects during the early period of Zionist settlement. Chapter 3 will provide a parallel narrative showing the great importance of Arab history in shaping Arab views and actions during this same period.

Jewish history, according to the Jewish Bible (the Old Testament of the Christian Bible), began almost 4,000 years ago with the patriarch Abraham, traditional forefather of both Jews and Arabs. Apart from its religious importance, the Bible is a remarkable historical document for the detail it
offers regarding the chronicles of the Hebrew people, centuries before any such accounts existed elsewhere, and for its focus on defeats and tragedies as well as victories and glory (it is, after all, a morality tale). The first non-biblical mention of the Jewish people is an Egyptian inscription, the Merneptah Stele, dated c. 1220 BCE, in which the Egyptian ruler boasts that "Israel is laid waste and his seed is not" (Malamat 1976: 42). This corresponds roughly to the period of the Israelite conquest of Canaan following the Exodus from Egypt, as recorded in the Bible. Many of the conquered peoples were related Semitic groups, some of which apparently assimilated to the Israelite tradition while others remained separate during and after the biblical period. Other archeological and historical records of biblical people and events begin appearing around the time of Kings David and Solomon and the building of the First Temple in Jerusalem, roughly 1,000 BCE, and they multiply over the following centuries.

Jews therefore have one of the longest histories - if not the longest - as a distinct people with a continuous identity expressed in language, culture, genealogy, and religious practice. Furthermore, this identity endured despite geographic dispersion and the lack of a physical homeland. The survival of the Jews as a distinct people is often regarded as one of history's greatest puzzles. The eminent historian Arnold Toynbee, who constructed an elegant intellectual edifice of world history built on the rhythmic rise and fall of successive civilizations, classified the Jews of today as one of a handful of "fossilized relics of societies now extinct" (Toynbee 1955: 51). How could the Hebrews or Israelites of antiquity have survived when other peoples of the Bible - Canaanites, Jebusites, Philistines, Hittites, Babylonians, Moabites, etc. - had long since vanished from the stage of history?

The answer to this question clearly relates in some way to the key contribution that Judaism made to human history: Jews introduced monotheism to the world. From this small patch of arid land came the stunning insight that revolutionized religious belief and practice everywhere. In the words of Israel's 1948 Proclamation of Independence, "The Land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people... Here they achieved independence and created a culture of national and universal significance. Here they wrote and gave the Bible to the world." The monotheistic revelation was not just a theological event; it also introduced an entirely new way of looking at the world. Thomas Cahill, in The Gifts of the Jews (1998), sums it up in the book's subtitle: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels. The belief in one God moved people from a cyclical view of history, in which change is illusory, to a linear view that lays the foundation for ethical responsibility. In Cahill's words, "the Jews were able to give us the Great Whole, a unified universe that makes sense and that, because of its evident superiority as a worldview, completely overwhelms the warring and contradictory phenomena of polytheism" (Cahill 1998: 240).

Out of this tradition came the three monotheistic world religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Toynbee himself connected Jewish survival to its relationship with Christianity and Islam: "The Jews' present-day importance, celebrity, and discomfort all derive from the historic fact that they have involuntarily begotten two Judaic world-religions whose millions of adherents make the preposterous but redoubtable claim to have superseded the Jews" (Toynbee 1961: 479). Though often at war with each other (and within themselves), the three faiths constitute an "Abrahamic" family of religions, and in more reflective moments they recognize their mutual kinship. As Pope Pius XI declared, "we are spiritual progeny of Abraham. Spiritually, we are all Semites" (Martin 1983: 18).

But while Christianity and Islam claim universal validity, and have sought converts among all nations and peoples, Judaism has retained a sense of peoplehood. Being Jewish is not a matter of professed belief, but of sharing a common heritage; one may be Jewish without being religious. From one perspective, this makes Judaism more limited and parochial, with an emphasis on the "particularism" of one ethnic group rather than on a universalist message that (at least in theory) is addressed to all races and cultures.
However, by the same token there is a fundamental tolerance for other traditions and religions, since there is no impulse to make all non-Jews into Jews.

The particularism of Judaism is a matter not only of shared ancestry and history as a people, but also of attachment to a particular place. The geography of Eretz Yisrael is interwoven into Jewish scripture, litany, ritual, and tradition. Jews may have a portable package of religious practices that they can carry with them to any place, but there is never any doubt that Eretz Yisrael remains the eternal spiritual center. Religious Jews pray three times a day for the return to Jerusalem. As long ago as the Babylonian exile (fifth–sixth centuries BCE), the yearning to return was expressed lyrically in Psalm 137:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat,
And we wept, as we remembered Zion.
On the willows there we hung up our harps,
For our captors there asked us for songs,
Our tormentors, for amusement,
“How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"
If I forget thee, O Jerusalem,
Let my right hand forget her cunning;
If I do not remember thee,
Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth,
If I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.

The theme of exile and return is a central motif in Jewish tradition that, given the biblical tales of Joseph (exile to Egypt) and Moses (exodus from Egypt), predates the Babylonian captivity by several centuries. After the return from Babylon, and the building of the Second Temple, came exile at the hands of the Romans, in the first and second centuries CE, following the crushing of two Jewish revolts against Roman rule. In the traditional structure of a morality tale, exile is punishment by God for the collective failings of the Jewish people, while return signifies divine mercy as the sinners are given another chance to redeem themselves. The idea of Return to Zion also came to be associated with messianism, the belief in the promised appearance of the messiah (the “anointed one”) who would not only lead Jews back to Zion (emblem of the Holy Land), but would also bring about the final redemption of Jews and, ultimately, of all mankind.

Palestine, like most areas of the Roman Empire, was gradually Christianized in the early centuries of the Christian era. After the Arab conquest of 636–40, immigration and conversion created an Islamic and Arab majority, though Christian and Jewish minorities remained. From the third to the tenth centuries the center of Jewish life passed to Babylon, where – despite the return from the earlier exile, recorded in the biblical chronicles of Ezra and Nehemiah – a significant Jewish population had remained. It was during this period that the Talmud, the great repository of Jewish law, was compiled, with the Babylonian rendition as the dominant version.

As a protected minority under Islam, from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries Jews also became active participants in a vibrant Muslim culture centered in Spain. This period is considered a “golden age” in both traditions. Spain replaced Babylonia as the center of Jewish culture and creativity, producing many of the most illustrious names in Jewish history: among others, the statesman Samuel Ha-Nagid; the poet-philosopher Solomon ibn Gabirol; the poet-mathematician Abraham ibn Ezra; the poets Moses ibn Ezra and Judah Halevi; and the great philosopher-theologian-scientist Maimonides (Moses ben Maimon). Eventually, however, religious zeal and intolerance undermined the creative interaction of the three traditions that had sustained this cultural flowering. The fanatic Muslim Almohad dynasty, of North African origin, invaded Muslim Spain in the twelfth century and destroyed many centers of Jewish life, forcing Jews to flee to areas of Christian rule in northern Spain. But the Christian reconquest of Spain, completed by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella in 1492, brought with it a surge in Christian zealotry. For the century before this, Jews had been under enormous pressure to convert; those who did were then subjected to the Inquisition, established in 1483 to determine whether their new Christianity was genuine. Finally – and
also, strikingly, in 1492 – the remaining Jews were given the choice of conversion or expulsion.

The Spanish expulsion of 1492 was a major watershed in Jewish history. It ended a remarkable chapter of collaborative creativity and achievement, and produced a flood of refugees (known as Sephardim: “Spaniards” in Hebrew) who came to constitute a major recognized group within the Jewish world. Many found their way into the rising Ottoman Empire, whose ruler (Sultan Bajazet) reputedly exclaimed, “What! Call ye this Ferdinand ‘wise’ – he who depopulates his own dominions in order to enrich mine?” (Roth 1961: 252). Some even settled in Eretz Yisrael, where they were prominent in the emergence of Safed (in the Galilee) as a center of Jewish law and religious mysticism.

Throughout Jewish history, and especially in turbulent times, the idea of Return to Zion remained an important fixture in Jewish thought. Many individuals did manage to return, often toward the end of their lives so that they might at least be buried in holy ground. Though still more of a religious yearning than a political program, the vision of a collective return of Jews to Zion was never far from the surface, as evidenced in the excitement raised by a series of “false messiahs” who stirred the Jewish world over succeeding centuries: Solomon Molcho (in sixteenth-century Italy), Shabbetai Zevi (in the seventeenth-century Ottoman Empire), and Jacob Frank (in eighteenth-century Poland and Ukraine).

From the fifteenth century the center of Jewish life shifted to Eastern Europe. The persecutions and expulsions in Western Europe, beginning with the First Crusade in the late eleventh century, had forced many Jews to flee. At the same time, some rulers in Eastern Europe were welcoming Jewish refugees, who brought Western commercial and artisanal skills. In 1264 the Polish Duke Boleslaw issued the Statute of Kalisz, granting Jews rights of residence and protection. This began a tradition of Polish and other rulers granting autonomy to Jewish communities, which developed into flourishing and largely self-governing entities. Since most of the refugees came from Germany, they brought with them a mixture of medieval German dialects that evolved into Yiddish, a Germanic language written in Hebrew characters. From the Hebrew word for Germany, Ashkenaz, came the designation of this community, and most European Jews, as Ashkenazim.

Beginning in the 1700s these communities experienced an astounding population growth – a “demographic miracle” – as the mortality rate dropped sharply with improved health and living conditions. The estimated world Jewish population in 1700 was about 1 million, which was about what it had been 1,200 years earlier (after peaking in the first century at about 4.5 million). Two centuries later, in 1900, there were an estimated 10.6 million Jews in the world, with Eastern Europe accounting for about 90 percent of this total (Barnavi 1992: pp. xii–xiii; Ettinger 1976: 790–3). By this time, following the partition of Poland at the end of the eighteenth century, about half of the world’s Jews were living in territory annexed by Tsarist Russia, a state that had traditionally tried to forbid Jewish residence on its soil.

The Theme of Persecution

As this brief overview of Jewish history indicates, the central thread of Jewish history, as seen by most Jews, is the omnipresent threat of persecution. Persecution lies behind Jewish population movements, demography, and geography. Persecution is the recurrent theme that connects Jewish life in widely separated times and places.

What explains the persistence and virulence of anti-Semitism? (The term itself was invented by the anti-Semites to make hatred of Jews sound more clinical (Wistrich 1991: 252).) But perhaps the question should be: What explains the persecution of any minority? There is no reason to think that hostility to Jews differs essentially from persecution of other minorities; what is different is that, historically, Jews have found themselves more often in an exposed, isolated, and vulnerable situation. All too often Jews have been the most distinctly different minority, or the only minority in critical respects – for example, the major visible non-Christian group
in times and places when militant Christianity was on the
march. In addition, the organic link with Christianity (and
Islam to a lesser extent) was a curse rather than a blessing,
since it led both faiths, at certain times, to consign Jews to a
theological role as villains.
Persecution of Jews began before the rise of Christianity.
In the Biblical book of Esther, set in Persia five centuries
before the Christian era, King Ahasuerus (Xerxes) is told by
his counselor Haman that “there is a certain people scattered
abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces
of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from all people;
neither keep they the king’s laws: therefore it is not for the
king’s profit to suffer them” (Esther 3: 8). This certainly
demonstrates classic suspicion of a minority, but with the rise
of Christianity it acquires a religious basis, as early Christians
sought to distinguish their religion from, and to discredit, the
Judaism of the day. Likewise, in the Qur’an (the holy scripture
of Islam) Muhammad’s anger at the Jews for rejecting
his message is reflected in negative passages about Jews,
though Jews as People of the Book are also given the right to
practice their own religion.
The Jewish Haggada telling the story of Passover, which
was compiled during the centuries of exile, declares that “it
was not one enemy alone who rose up against us to destroy
us; in every generation there are those who rise up against us
and seek to destroy us.” By this time the recurrence of per-
secution was already deeply embedded in Jewish conscious-
ness. But the worst was yet to come. The First Crusade,
lunched to rescue the Holy Land from Muslim “infidels,”
began in 1096 with orgiastic massacres of the enemies of
Christ – the Jews – in Europe. It is estimated that one-quarter
to one third of the Jews in Germany and northern France
were murdered. In the climate of religious fervor that pre-
vailed in the following centuries, religious figures and rulers
condemned Jews, as a people, to perpetual servitude, and the
infamous blood libel – the fantasy that Jews murdered Chris-
tian children and used their blood to make Passover matza –
became the trigger for savage massacres (Wistrich 1991;

Jews were expelled from England in 1290, from France in
1306 and 1394, from most German states in the fifteenth
century, from Provence in 1500–1, from Saxony, Sicily, and
Sardinia in 1536, from Tuscany in 1571, from Milan in 1597,
and from most other Western European areas at one time or
another (including, of course, Spain in 1492). The Spanish
Inquisition, which targeted Jews who had converted to
Christianity, was the first eerie premonition of “modern”
anti-Semitism based on race rather than religion; in the late
nineteenth century its full-blown emergence would be a key
factor in persuading many Jews that Zionism – a Jewish state
was the only answer.

Flight from west to east was the immediate Jewish
response, and one which fitted the pattern of Jewish history.
Fortunately there was usually a haven: Poland during the
late Middle Ages, the Ottoman Empire after the expulsion
from Spain, the New World more recently. But by the seven-
teenth century the Eastern European haven was also shaken
by violent outbursts of anti-Semitic assaults. In 1648–9 a
massive Cossack and peasant uprising led by a minor Ukrain-
ian noble, Bogdan Chmielnicki, focused with particular inten-
sity on the massacre of Jews, who were caught between Polish
landlords and Ukrainian peasants. Subsequent attacks on
Jews in Poland took place in 1680, 1687, 1734, 1750, and
1768. Annexation of Ukraine and Poland by the notoriously
anti-Semitic Tsarist regime promised no relief.

By this time the Enlightenment and the spread of liberal
institutions in Western Europe had created a new situation.
Jews had returned to Western Europe and were building
strong communities, and in some cases were being granted
total civil equality. By the late nineteenth century they were
leaving Russia and other Eastern European nations in large
numbers for Western destinations, including the New World,
where new societies were being built and prejudice was much
less institutionalized. In view of this progress and this promis-
ing situation, why should this period, of all periods in Jewish
history, produce the first serious organized movement for a
return to Eretz Yisrael? Just when it appeared that liberal-
ization might succeed in resolving the age-old problem of
Jewish persecution, why should a significant proportion of the Jewish community decisively reject assimilation?

Part of the answer is that assimilation was not without costs or problems. To more traditional elements it was seen as a critical threat; as in other modernizing societies, more strictly religious Jews reacted by separating themselves, as much as possible, from modern secular influences, and “returning to their roots.” This characterizes the hasidic movement (founded in the eighteenth century) and more recent “fundamentalist” groups, collectively known today as haredim (literally, “those who tremble [before God]”). But even less traditional, more secularized Jews did not want an integration that meant loss of Jewish identity. In many cases it appeared that Jews were being offered the chance to integrate only as individuals and not as a group, and only if they did not insist on remaining Jewish in any meaningful sense. One could become French, but only if it was a total conversion. In some ways life had been simpler before; Jews were confined by their group identity, but at least they knew who they were.

A second problem was that the new nationalism in Europe was less welcoming than it appeared. As the stress on common ethnicity grew, the question arose: Could a Jew truly become a Frenchman or a German? One could convert to another religion, but not to another ancestry. The dilemma was strikingly represented in the experience of Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern political Zionism. In 1881 Herzl, as a “good German,” joined a German nationalist fraternity at his university; but within two years he was forced to resign when it became clear that Jews were not being accepted as Germans. By the end of the century a new and more vicious anti-Semitism, based on race rather than religion, had emerged. The 1894–5 Dreyfus trial in France, where a totally assimilated French Jewish army officer was deliberately framed for treason, shocked and disillusioned the Jewish world, and those who had been the most eager to assimilate now became the most disillusioned. These were people known as maskilim – proponents of the Jewish enlightenment (haskala) and of integration into modern Western liberal society – who felt betrayed and began to look for new, and radical, answers to the problem they had thought was on its way to resolution.

The surest way to foment revolution, it has been claimed, is to extend real hope of a better future and then snatch it away. This was about to be tested in Tsarist Russia, “prison house of nations,” where half the world’s Jews were living as the decade of the 1880s began.

“Come, Let Us Go”

On March 1, 1881, Tsar Alexander II was assassinated. Alexander II’s reign (1855–81) was the period of “Great Reforms” in Russia; the serfs were liberated, and other far-reaching measures were decreed to pull Russia out of its backward ways. This included vast changes in the status of Jews: residence restrictions were loosened, opportunities in higher education and government service were expanded, and integration into Russian society was encouraged. With doors open as never before, many Jews – especially the maskilim – made great strides during these decades.

But the new Tsar, Alexander III, was dominated by conservative advisors who feared and detested Western liberal ideas. Signals from the top were picked up quickly; within weeks a wave of violent attacks on Jewish communities began to sweep the country (the Russian word “pogrom,” or devastation, came into use during this period). By year’s end an estimated 250 pogroms had devastated Jewish communities across Russia, all with little or no interference by the police or the army. Instead, the new Russian regime, calculating that anti-Semitism was a useful tool for diverting popular discontent, blamed the Jews for having roused the anger of the people,” and used the situation to justify the reimposition of extensive restrictions on Jews (Ettinger 1976: 881–8).

Thus began a dark period in Russian Jewish history that led to the massive flight of 4 million refugees over the next four decades. Following the historical pattern, most moved to new places of refuge, this time in Western Europe and the
Americas. But a small trickle, fewer than 2 percent of them, chose instead to enact a Return to Zion (Zion, a hill in Jerusalem, had since biblical days served as a poetic reference to the Land of Israel). Why return to Zion at this time? Anti-Semitism was persistent in Jewish history, but it had never sparked a significant movement to Eretz Yisrael. Zion had always seemed an unpromising and inhospitable alternative, and this was certainly no less true in the declining years of Turkish rule there.

But this time there were important differences. In the first place, as the various nations of Europe discovered and reaffirmed their own claims to nationhood and national self-determination, Jews were also drawn to the model of the nation-state. The Return to Zion, previously a religious aspiration, became a political program. Were the Jews less entitled to national sovereignty than the Serbs or the Albanians? Secondly, as the ugly side of the new nationalism began to show itself, the possibility of successful assimilation into someone else’s nation-state appeared increasingly a delusion. The new wave of anti-Semitism, not just in Russia but also elsewhere in Eastern Europe (Romania in particular), Germany, Austria-Hungary, and even liberal, progressive France, led to one conclusion: anti-Semitism was incurable. The assimilation experiment had been tried, and had failed. Why repeat the mistake?

Again, only about 2 percent of the Jewish refugees, at the time, found this argument compelling enough to take on the rigors and challenges of Eretz Yisrael. Who were these brave – or foolhardy – pioneers? They were not the elderly, who had previously traveled to the Holy Land in order to be buried there, nor were they among the devoutly religious who were drawn to Zion out of religious obligation. They were overwhelmingly young, relatively well educated, and from the ranks of the maskilim. They were precisely those who had tried to assimilate, and were now bitterly disillusioned. They came to Eretz Yisrael not in order to find personal salvation, but in order to further an entirely new solution to the age-old “Jewish problem.” The mood of the times is recorded in the diary of one pioneer:

With my own eyes I saw the terrible tragedy in one of the more beautiful and enlightened cities, in which important people were joining in. If they did not actually do the beating, they were stirring the fire and adding fuel to the flames. When I saw all this something in me snapped... In one flash all my illusions were revealed, and all the beautiful pictures of the future, that I and my friends painted for ourselves, dissipated like smoke.

And I, a law student, a member of a cosmopolitan intellectual society, devoted to progress – I felt suddenly my unique Jewish soul, and with all my might I felt that these unfortunate people, heartbroken and at wit’s end, are my brothers and with them I am in distress from now and evermore... .

There is a source of hope. Eretz Yisrael must become our future land. Only there will our people find rest and relief. Only there will it find a place to bring its old, dry bones to life. It only needs a beginning. (Druyanov 1933)

The writer of these lines was one of about 500 young people in the Kharkov area, many of them university students, who came together to form the Bilu society. The name was taken from Isaiah 2: 5: “Beit Ya’akov, l’chu v’nolcha [House of Jacob, come, let us go].” As an early manifesto declared, Jews needed to awaken from “the false dream of assimilation.” The goal of the movement was defined as “a home in our country,” which the Biluim proposed to beg of the Sultan himself. Recognizing implicitly that the Sultan might not be so generous, they proposed asking for at least “a state within a larger state” that would govern itself domestically but act with the Turkish Empire in foreign affairs “so as to help our brother Ishmael in the time of his need” (Laqueur and Rubin 2001: 3–4).

The Biluim were insignificant numerically; only 14 managed to enter Eretz Yisrael during the first year, and altogether only about 60 actually settled there, and many of those did not remain. Their significance was that of an intellectual vanguard that first declared the explicit goal of statehood, which only a few Jewish intellectuals were ready to support openly (one of these was Leon Pinsker, whose 1882 pamphlet Self-Emancipation was the first Zionist scripture,
though at the time it was little noted outside Russian Jewish circles).

Groups similar to Bilu were, however, springing up in Jewish communities across Russia. By the mid-1880s they had become loosely linked together as the Hovevei Zion (Lovers of Zion) movement, soon to be known simply as “Zionism.” Hovevei Zion focused on settlement in Eretz Yisrael and the rebuilding of Jewish life there, sending several thousand settlers during the 1880s and a total of somewhere between 20,000 and 30,000 by 1903 (Bachi 1974: 79). Since immigration to Eretz Yisrael is extolled in Hebrew as aliyah (ascent), this wave of settlers is known as the first aliyah. These newcomers founded ten new settlements during the 1880s and another seven in the 1890s, while many others settled in existing cities. The new settlements were concentrated in low-lying, often marshy areas that were relatively sparsely populated: the coastal plain, the Jezre’el Valley between the coast and the Sea of Galilee, and the Jordan Valley around and north of the Sea of Galilee. This was because only in these areas were significant plots of potential agricultural land available for purchase.

There was a strong agrarian thrust to this settlement effort, reflecting a deep-seated yearning for a return to the soil as part of the return to life as a “normal” nation. Because of their all-Jewish character and their ideological virtues, the rural settlements have received most of the attention in Zionist history, even though there were always more Jews in the cities (which included not only many in the “new” yishuv, or community, but also all of the “old” yishuv, the more traditional Jewish community that had existed before Zionism and was largely hostile to the newcomers). The new rural settlements faced monumental obstacles and hardships, not least the total lack of agricultural experience or knowledge among the young intellectuals who founded them. Most of them survived only through the generous support of “the well-known benefactor,” Baron Edmund de Rothschild from the French branch of the illustrious family.

Nevertheless, despite the hardships, and despite hostility from the old yishuv and open opposition from Turkish authorities and Arab neighbors, the new yishuv slowly gained ground. By 1903 there were about 50,000 Jews in the areas that later became the Palestine Mandate. The new yishuv was dedicated to the aim of building a self-reliant and prosperous Jewish society and culture; one of its triumphs was the rebirth of Hebrew as a spoken language after two millennia of confinement to written and liturgical use only. The explanation for this feat lies not only in the ideological fervor of the advocates, but also in the fact that nearly all educated Jews had some knowledge of the language, and in the reality that there was no other common tongue with which European Jews and non-European Jews could communicate with each other.

Nevertheless, the achievements of the first two decades of Jewish settlement were not impressive. Jews still constituted less than 10 percent of the population, and of this number only a few thousand were in the new “Zionist” settlements, and their presence was little noted. The first aliyah, in and of itself, failed to put the Return to Zion on the world’s agenda. This was achieved, however, at the end of the century, by an entirely unexpected and dramatic development from a different quarter.

**Herzl and the Second Aliyah**

The unlikely figure who put Zionism on the world map was a 35-year-old assimilated Viennese Jewish journalist and sometime playwright who knew little about Judaism or the first aliyah. Theodor Herzl was representative of Jews in Western Europe who, like those in Russia, had put their confidence in assimilation into modernizing European societies, only to be stunned by the new nationalist and racial anti-Semitism of the 1890s. Herzl covered the 1894–5 conviction and degradation of French army officer Alfred Dreyfus for Vienna’s leading newspaper, the *Neue Freie Presse*; he was even more appalled by the rising tide of Jew-hatred in his own Vienna, where the rabidly anti-Semitic Karl Lueger won a smashing victory in municipal elections in September 1895 (Kornberg 1993). Three months earlier Herzl had spent a
feverish two weeks composing a “new solution” to the Jewish problem; now he reworked this material into a pamphlet, The Jews’ State: An Attempt at a Modern Solution to the Issue of the Jews, and published it in February 1896.

Though Herzl was unaware of the earlier Zionists and their ideas, his argument brought these ideas together in dramatic style and took them one step further. Herzl argued that:

1. Anti-Semitism is inevitable, even in supposedly enlightened countries.
2. Assimilation is therefore doomed to failure, and Jewish life will remain deformed.
3. The only logical solution is a Jewish state; even anti-Semites should support the idea.
4. For this to happen, there must be broad international support (Herzl was not impressed by the small-scale “infiltration” into Ottoman Palestine).
5. The “present possessors” of territory set aside as a Jewish state would benefit from its development into a modern society. (Herzl 1997)

In essence, Herzl was arguing for the integration of Jews into world history – but as a nation, not as individuals. Jews would achieve a normal existence only when they enjoyed equality with other nations that had achieved independent statehood. Other key points worth noting are that the project is conceived as a rescue from persecution more than an assertion of Jewish identity, that it in fact contains little “Jewish” content in Herzl’s formulation, and that it does not recognize any serious conflict of interests with other parties (existing states, native populations, and even anti-Semites will all gain from the venture).

Herzl’s little pamphlet was one of those landmark historical documents whose impact derives not from their content but from their success in striking the right chord at the right moment. The Jews’ State was rapidly translated into numerous languages, and had an explosive impact on both Jewish and non-Jewish worlds. This was the breakthrough that brought Zionism to the world’s attention. Herzl exploited the momentum created to organize the World Zionist Organization (WZO) at a conference in Basel, Switzerland, in August 1897, bringing together most of the disparate groups loosely organized previously into Hovevei Zion. The aim of the movement was defined as “to create for the Jewish people a home in Palestine secured by public law.” The emphasis on “public law” reflected Herzl’s insistence on working openly within the existing state system; the designation of “Palestine” reflected the fact that the bulk of Herzl’s clientele came from Eastern Europe and, unlike Herzl, could not conceive of a Jewish state anywhere but in the ancestral homeland. The specification of “home” rather than “state” reflected sensitivity to the fact that Palestine was already part of a state (the Ottoman Empire) whose government was unlikely to welcome yet another secessionist threat in its heartland.

Herzl wanted a “charter” from the Sultan that would create an area for Jewish settlement in Palestine; to do this, he worked from the top down. Exploiting the attention gained by the new WZO, in the following years he conducted a frenzied diplomacy trying to bring the German, British, and French governments, the Pope, and many others, even including the Russian Tsar, to support the project and use their influence in Constantinople. Only once, in 1901, was Herzl himself granted an audience with the Sultan – and this was on condition that he not raise the subject of Zionism! Burned out within a few years by his frenetic pace, Herzl died in 1904 at the age of 44, without having achieved his charter or having significantly advanced actual Jewish settlement in Palestine. He left behind, however, a mass movement that had galvanized the hopes and dreams of Jews everywhere, but especially the increasingly desperate masses in Eastern Europe. He also left behind an organizational framework ready to respond to the next emergency in Jewish life anywhere.

This next emergency was already looming. As before and since, the Zionist movement was revived by another wave of savage persecution and another wave of embittered refugees. It began with a bloody pogrom in the Russian city of Kishinev...
in 1903, an atrocity that led to a classic statement of helplessness and rage by the emerging Hebrew national poet Haim Nahman Bialik, in "On the Slaughter":

You, executioner! Here's my neck - go to it, slaughter me! Behead me like a dog, yours is the mighty arm and the axe, and the whole earth is my scaffold and we, we are the few. . . .
And cursed be the man who says:
Avenge! No such revenge - revenge for the blood of a little child - has yet been devised by Satan.

As the Russian regime continued to use Jews as a convenient target to divert popular discontent, the first Russian Revolution of 1905 triggered a massive repetition of what had begun at Kishinev. The resulting exodus from Russia brought about 34,000 Jewish settlers to Ottoman Palestine in the decade before World War I, a wave of newcomers known as the second aliyah (Bachi 1974: 79). This, rather than the first aliyah, was the group that produced most of the leaders and set the ideological tone for the yishuv until well after Israel became a state (until 1977, in fact). Second aliyah pioneers, imbued with the Russian revolutionary spirit, combined Zionism not just with an agrarian ethos, but also with a socialist and proletarian ideology that made all manual labor an object of worship. The emphasis on reforming and rebuilding the basic structure of Jewish life, and not just saving Jewish lives, became an integral and central pillar of the enterprise. First aliyah settlers were denounced for employing Arabs in their villages, on the grounds that this undercut the aim of self-reliance, duplicated colonial patterns of exploitation of native labor, and would not contribute to the rehabilitation of Jewish life and the Jewish occupational structure. On the other hand, some of the veterans defended the practice on the grounds that it created a moderating mutual dependence and brought benefits to the Arabs that would soften their opposition to Zionism.

The doctrine of manual labor as a form of secular redemption was represented in its purest form by Aaron David Gordon, who came to Palestine in 1904, at the unusually advanced age of 47, to work as an agricultural laborer. His writings on self-realization through physical labor were a strong influence in the emergence of the kibbutz (communal settlement) as the second aliyah's iconic contribution to the developing yishuv. In Gordon's words,

We were defeated through lack of labor. . . . Work will heal us. In the center of all our hopes we must place work; our entire structure must be founded on labor. If only we set up work itself as the ideal - rather, if only we bring into the open the ideal of labor, shall we be cured of the disease which attacked us. We shall then sew together the rents by which we were torn from nature. (Gordon 1938: 56)

With ideological primacy assigned to physical labor and a return to the soil, it is easy to lose perspective on the actual structure of Jewish life in Ottoman Palestine. In 1880 the existing Jewish population (the old yishuv) was 99.3 percent urban; by 1914 the total Jewish population was still 87.1 percent urban (Bachi 1974: 6). Much of the new yishuv settled in existing cities such as Jerusalem, Jaffa, and Haifa. Furthermore, many of the early rural settlements (Rishon Lezion, Petach Tikva, Hadera, Rehovot, Gederah) evolved into substantial cities in the course of time. The urban proclivity of most newcomers was also expressed in the founding, in 1909, of the first all-new all-Hebrew city, Tel Aviv, and by its rapid growth in the following decades.

This brings us, however, to a pivotal question. When Jews motivated by the Zionist vision entered Palestinian areas of the Ottoman Empire during the last decades of its existence, they encountered a population already in place. Only those imagining Palestine from afar could describe it as an “empty” land, and such fantasies did not survive actual settlement experience. What notice did the first “Zionist” settlers take of the population that they encountered, and what did they make of it? Above all, did they see it as a problem?
First Encounters

In fact, Zionist settlers did not see the presence of Arabs in Eretz Yisrael/Filastin as a problem. They certainly noted the presence of an indigenous population, but they rejected the notion that their new Zion would replicate the Diaspora pattern of an insecure Jewish minority contending with a hostile majority. In the first place, as they saw it, Jewish religious and historical ties to the Holy Land were undeniable and incontestable. The world seemed to recognize this link beyond any doubt; despite their sometimes hostile attitudes, both Christianity and Islam recorded a Jewish history in Palestine as part of their own scriptures. Furthermore, the world certainly did not seem inclined to welcome a Jewish homeland anywhere else on the globe.

As for the existing residents of Palestine, they would be treated fairly and would share in the benefits of the developing homeland. In the spirit of the times, the introduction of a modernizing population would raise the level of the entire country, bringing the blessings of modern (read: Western) civilization to all its inhabitants. It was sufficient, in this view, to better the welfare of non-Jewish residents as individuals, since they had not (yet) laid claim to a national identity, and collective rights, as a people (see chapter 3). One early Zionist leader, Israel Zangwill, used the phrase “a land without a people for a people without a land,” by which he meant that Palestine was a land not identified with a specific nation (other than Jews), not that it was uninhabited (Garfinkle 1991).

Thus the early Zionists saw no necessary, objective conflict between the rebuilding of a Jewish homeland in Eretz Yisrael and respect for the rights of the non-Jewish population – so long as these rights were considered on the individual level. As individuals, Arab inhabitants would prosper and would enjoy the freedoms of liberal societies: religious freedom, civil and political rights, equality before the law. The process by which the first settlers concluded that this was not a “real” problem is strikingly condensed in a few pages

of the diary of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, considered the key mover in the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language, who arrived in 1881. Ben-Yehuda’s encounter with demographic reality when he landed in Jaffa was disconcerting:

I must confess that this, my first meeting with our cousins Ishmael, was not a joyous meeting for me. A depressing feeling of fear, as though before a fortified wall, suddenly filled my soul. I felt that they see themselves as citizens of the land that was the land of my fathers, and that I, the son of these fathers, I come to this land as a stranger, as a foreigner. (Ben-Yehuda 1941: i. 26)

Within a few days, however, Ben-Yehuda is able to record a more reassuring view of this reality:

However, I also found a little comfort regarding the general position of the Arabs in Eretz Yisrael, which I have already managed to observe: that in general it is very lowly, that they are impoverished paupers and total illiterates. This fact... was for me the first ray of light since the moment that my foot trod on the land of our fathers. (Ben-Yehuda 1941: i. 37)

The lowly position of the Arabs, which Ben-Yehuda exaggerates to strengthen his case, becomes justification for the Jewish role in Palestine. The early Zionists, we should recall, tended to come from the ranks of the maskilim – that is, from the most Western-oriented sectors of Russian Jewish society. They saw themselves as “Europeans,” a self-reference that occurs often in their writings, and they were seen as Europeans by the Arabs. European civilization was, they felt, more advanced, not only in technology but also in culture, education, government, law, ethics, and most other spheres of life. This was an age in which the spread of European ideas and techniques was not questioned, as the benefits seemed beyond dispute. In this spirit one of the founders of Rishon Lezion wrote that “if the colonies are established in bonds of love and peace, then the holy land will be a land of freedom and liberty for them; they will not hear the voice of the gendarme and the taskmaster, and the Arabs who people the land will
submit to them with the attitude of love and respect they show to all Europeans who work the soil and engage in commerce here” (Laskov 1982: 190-1).

In this idyllic view, not only is there no objective conflict of interest between Jews and Arabs in Palestine, but nothing is required for the future of the relationship beyond the success of Zionism itself. Achievement of the Zionist program will assure justice to both sides. Negotiation is not necessary, let alone any thought of military force. (In fact, the very idea of military force was ludicrous; Jews had no talent, experience, or inclination for soldierly!) There is no need to negotiate or fight, since there is no collective entry on the other side; there are only individuals to be dealt with on an individual basis. Negotiation comes into play only on the level of the Turkish government, which wields real power and can obstruct the Zionist project (see below).

Ahad Ha’am, Zionism’s most vigorous internal critic, wrote a manifesto entitled “Truth from Eretz Yisrael,” in 1891, that is widely but inaccurately regarded as the first serious Zionist recognition of an “Arab problem.” He does condemn Jewish conduct toward Arabs: “They walk with the Arabs in hostility and cruelty, unjustly encroaching on them, shamefully beating them for no good reason, and even bragging about what they do.” But in fact Ahad Ha’am shared the general view that the success of the Zionist enterprise would in itself resolve any conflict by bringing the blessings of European civilization to the local population, and in the end by simply overwhelming it: “Even if in the course of time jealousy might cause hatred, this is nothing,” because “by that time our brothers would be able to secure their position in Eretz Yisrael by their large number, their extensive and rich holdings, their unity, and their exemplary way of life” (Ginzberg 1891, tr. Dowty 2000: 175, 178).

Only in 1907 did a Zionist writer finally suggest that the relationship with the Arabs of Palestine was, in fact, “a question that outweighs all the others.” Yitzhak Epstein, a teacher who had settled in Rosh Pina in 1886, published an article entitled “A Hidden Question” in Hashiloah, the journal founded by Ahad Ha’am (Epstein 1907, tr. Dowty 2001b).

Epstein argued for a negotiated solution that would make the Arabs partners and beneficiaries in the Zionist enterprise, though Jews would remain the senior partners. His advocacy of benevolent paternalism had little immediate impact, but did help to frame the debate within the Zionist movement that developed in the following years. Opposed to Epstein’s integrative approach appeared separatist or confrontational approaches which argued that Zionism had to maintain its distance from alien cultures, and that in any event a clash with the local population was inevitable (Gorny 1987). Though the positions of all parties have undergone many transformations in the years since, the basic issues and possible solutions remain basically as defined in the early debates.

While it may have taken Jewish settlers some time to recognize the depth and seriousness of Arab opposition, they could hardly ignore the opposition of the Ottoman regime, which opposed them consistently at every turn. In fact, the Ottoman government even banned the entry of Russian Jews before it began, in an 1881 edict. From the Turkish perspective, the ferment in Russia and the gathering flood of refugees could well be a Russian plot to create a base of Russian nationals in Palestine. The Ottoman Empire did not completely abandon its traditional role as a haven for Jewish refugees; Jews were welcome, it announced, anywhere in Ottoman territory except for Palestine (meaning primarily the mutasarriflik of Jerusalem). Also, they could settle only as scattered individuals, not as an organized movement with a geographical concentration, and they must become Ottoman subjects and give up the protection of European consuls.

This remained the basic Ottoman policy until the fall of the empire (Mandel 1976). Some aspects of it were relaxed occasionally under pressure from the European powers, since it conflicted with their use of the Capitulations to further their influence within Ottoman territory. It also conflicted with commitments made by the Ottoman regime, in its 1856 edict, to total non-discrimination on the basis of religion. But, by and large, it is fair to say that the Ottoman government, to the best of its ability, tried to prevent European Jews from
establishing a toehold in its Palestinian provinces. In addition to trying to prevent the entry of Jews, it also forbade the sale of land to those who managed to enter anyway, and refused to issue building permits to those who managed to buy land anyway.

In that case, how did the Zionists succeed to the extent that they did? By 1914, there were an estimated 94,000 Jews in what became Mandatory Palestine (Bachi 1974: 5). Of course it is likely that, had the door been open, there would have been many more; the Turkish policies were not totally ineffectual. But Zionists who were really determined found ways around or through the obstructions. One recourse was to enter as religious pilgrims, whom the authorities were obligated to admit. Permits to pilgrims were for a limited period, but enforcement was problematic. Another was to enter through the land frontiers with Egypt or Lebanon, where enforcement was more sporadic than in Jaffa, the main port of entry to the mutasarriflik (the northern parts of Eretz Yisrael were, in any event, part of the Beirut vilayet). Apart from sheer inefficiency in the Ottoman bureaucracy, there was also the possibility of bribery (baksheesh), though this was more likely to work on the lower levels than with higher officials. Finally, once in Palestine, the new settlers could invoke the protection of their consuls to prevent deportation. In fact, it was the intervention of foreign consuls on behalf of their passport-holders that often proved decisive in gaining entry, in buying land, and in getting the prized building permits.

This, then, is the Jewish story, from its origins through the first phase of the Return to Zion. But there is, of course, another story to be told.

Two important phenomena, of the same nature yet opposed, which have still not attracted anyone’s attention, are emerging at this moment in Asiatic Turkey. These are the awakening of the Arab nation and the quiet effort of the Jews to reconstitute the ancient kingdom of Israel on a very large scale. These two movements are destined to fight each other endlessly until one overcomes the other. The fate of the entire world hinges on the final result of this struggle between these two peoples representing two contrary principles.

Najib Azuri (Azouri 1905: p. v)

The Glory of Islam

The story of the Arabs is closely linked to the surge of Islam across a great part of the globe, but it does not begin there. The first historical mention of Arabs is in an Assyrian inscription of 853 BCE. Assyrian and Babylonian sources mention the Arabs repeatedly in following centuries, referring to nomadic tribes in the neighboring desert regions of the northern Arabian peninsula. Later books of the Bible also contain such references. Greek sources were the first to label the entire peninsula as “Arabia,” while use of the term to describe nomads, or what today would be called Beduin, spread to the south. Even though both settled and nomadic populations
spoke Arabic dialects, the use of the term “Arab” to describe the Beduin persisted into modern times (Lewis 1993).

Just as they had avoided direct Roman rule, the tribes in the interior of the Arabian peninsula maintained their independence from contending Byzantine and Persian empires on their periphery. Politically divided into various tribal regimes, they traded with their neighbors and encountered the ideas of Judaism and Christianity. They also possessed a strong tradition of epic poetry, much of which still survives today; the pre-Islamic epic poems testify to the linguistic virtuosity that shaped the poetic Arabic of the Qur’an, Islam’s holy book.

Which single individual has had the greatest impact on human history? Jesus and Muhammad, the founders of two world religions that grew out of Judaism, both come to mind. Christianity swept the ancient Roman Empire and came to dominate Europe and the Americas; it has more adherents than any other faith. On the other hand, the rise of Christianity stretched over many centuries and was critically dependent on major figures, such as Paul the Apostle, who arose after Jesus’ death. Muhammad, however, left at his death a powerful movement whose already-established momentum carried it, within a few decades, to dominion over a vast realm from Spain to India. Drawing again from Arnold Toynbee’s sweeping view of world history, “Islam’s epiphany was dramatic by comparison to Christianity’s.” It took 300 years for the impact of Christianity to be felt on a grand scale, while “Islam made a comparable impact during the founder’s own lifetime, and its political fortunes were made by the founder himself” (Toynbee 1961: 461).

Nor was this simply a matter of military conquest. The Mongols, after all, conquered an even more extensive territory in an even shorter time. But the Mongols left only a faint imprint on the cultures they conquered, while the Muslim conquerors of the seventh and eighth centuries CE brought with them a system of thought and a way of life that transformed existing cultures forever. Islam triumphed primarily through the force of its ideas, not the military prowess of its leaders. Areas under Islamic rule underwent a process of Islamization; most of them also adopted the Arabic language, transforming a remote Semitic dialect into one of the world’s major tongues. Since the early conquests – and particularly in recent centuries – the spread of Islam has taken place mostly in areas not under Islamic rule, through peaceful conversion.

Muhammad was a middle-aged caravan trader, probably illiterate, when he began preaching in the city of Mecca in about 610 CE, at the age of 40. Mecca was a commercial center about halfway down the western (Red Sea) coast of the Arabian peninsula, in the area known as Hijaz. By the time of his death 22 years later, Muhammad had unified most of the Arabian peninsula under one political and religious regime, and had set in motion a campaign that, under the rulers who succeeded him (known as Caliphs, from Arabic khilafa, or successor), took Islam across North Africa into Europe, greatly reduced the Byzantine Empire, and swept over the Persian Empire and east into present-day India. Most of Iberia (Spain and Portugal) fell under Islamic rule, and Muslims remained there for over 800 years. France was also threatened; only a victory by Charles Martel in 732 at the battle of Tours – only 100 miles from Paris – stemmed the tide.

Palestine was part of the first wave of conquest following Muhammad’s death in 632 CE; Jerusalem fell to the Caliph Umar in 638. The indigenous population, descended from Jews, other Semitic groups, and non-Semitic groups such as the Philistines, had been mostly Christianized. Over succeeding centuries it was Islamicized, and Arabic replaced Aramaic (a Semitic tongue closely related to Hebrew) as the dominant language.

Within a century of Muhammad’s death Islam had swept across much of the known world like wildfire; there is no other historical phenomenon that matches it. Nothing in the previous history of the tribes in remote Arabia, or in the character of the arid and barren Hijaz, can explain this stunning explosion of history. It is testimony to the power and attraction of Islam itself. Muhammad was clearly influenced by the messages of Judaism and Christianity, the monotheistic Abrahamic faiths. But acting as the final “messenger” of God,
he transmitted a revelation of these messages that achieved breathtaking simplicity, flexibility, and universality. He turned back to pristine monotheism, rejecting the Christian Trinity, and universalized the message across all nations, races, and cultures. All are equal before God and have direct access to God; no mediating clergy is interposed. Islam -- which means “submission” -- is more than a religion: it is a way of life, with a strong ethical content and a code of law governing all of life. Because of its inclusiveness and simplicity, it is able to accommodate considerable diversity, not only on racial or cultural dimensions, but also in its own laws and practices. To be a Muslim, one need only affirm that “there is no God but God, and Muhammad is the Prophet of God.”

The Qur’an (literally: Recital) speaks as God’s voice, delivered by the angel Gabriel to Muhammad (unlike the Jewish or Christian Bibles, which are compilations of both divine and human voices). It is comparatively brief -- 114 chapters -- and is written in a clear and poetic Arabic that became the standard for written literary Arabic. Christians and Jews are often surprised by the familiarity of key figures and stories in the Qur’an: Adam, Noah, Abraham (father of Arabs as well as Jews), Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, Solomon, and Jesus. The Qur’an regards Jesus as one of the prophets, born to the Virgin Mary and resurrected after death, but denies his divinity (“God forbid that He Himself should beget a son!” (19: 35–6)).

The best-known words of the Qur’an are the first revelation given to Muhammad as he meditated in a cave outside Mecca:

Recite, in the name of thy Lord, who created, Created man from a clot of blood. Recite, for thy Lord is the most bounteous, Who teacheth by the pen, Teacheth man what he did not know. (96: 1–5)

Muhammad, but at the same time their role in the process of revelation is recognized:

If the People of the Book accept the true faith and keep from evil, We will pardon them their sins and admit them to the gardens of delight. If they observe the Torah and the Gospel and what is revealed from God, They shall be given abundance from above and from beneath... Believers, Jews, Sabaeans, or Christians -- Whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does what is right -- Shall have nothing to fear or regret. (5: 66, 69)

The first centuries of Islamic rule were a “golden age” in which the fusion of the new faith with the civilizations it encountered produced the most impressive flowering of civilization yet seen. From the eighth to the twelfth centuries, as Europe groped through the Dark Ages, Islamic civilization was “unmatched in its brilliancy and unsurpassed in its literary, scientific, and philosophic output” (Hitti 1970a: 3). The shifting center of power reflected the expansion of horizons. The first four Caliphs after Muhammad -- the “rightly-guided” Caliphs who still governed an undivided Islamic state -- continued to rule from Mecca. In 661, following a split over the succession that led to the Sunni-Shi’a division in Islam, the Umayyad Caliphate ruled from Damascus, and in 750 the Umayyads were displaced by the Abbasid Caliphate ruling from Baghdad. Though the Abbasid Caliphate lasted formally until the Mongol conquest in 1258, it disintegrated politically well before this, with rival dynasties springing up throughout the Islamic world. Nevertheless, it was the center of a cultural flowering that made Baghdad one of the centers of human civilization at the time, together with a flourishing Islamic civilization in Spain at the other end of the Arab world.

Islamic civilization was able to bring together and draw upon the achievements of Aramaic, Greek, Roman,
Byzantine, Egyptian, Persian, and Indian civilizations. The result was a burst of creativity that made advances in almost every sphere of human endeavor (Hitti 1970a).

- **Language and literature.** The Arabic language came, with the early Muslims, from Hijaz in the north of the Arabian peninsula. It is classified as a southern Semitic tongue, together with Ethiopian languages, while Hebrew, Phoenician, Aramaic, Assyrian, and other ancient Mesopotamian languages comprise the northern branch of the Semitic linguistic family. From its grammatical structure Arabic seems to be the “oldest” of surviving Semitic languages, meaning that it is closest to the original Semitic ancestral tongue. Its rapid spread as the language of Islam also made it the primary vehicle of a great civilization. Arabic-speaking areas such as Spain achieved a high level of literacy at a time when only a few of the clergy in medieval Europe could read and write. Books, bookstores, and libraries proliferated in Islamic areas; in particular, the strong Arab tradition in poetry combined with Persian and other models to produce illustrious achievements in literature. Philology, grammar, and lexicography were all highly developed in Arab culture, influencing the development of similar studies in Europe.

- **Education.** Primary education, centered in mosques, was extensive and was supported generously by some of the more enlightened rulers. The first universities in the world, by most accounts, were established in Cordova, Baghdad, and Cairo, in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Medical schools and the first schools of pharmacy were also established in Arab societies during this period.

- **Philosophy and theology.** Philosophy prospered, as Islamic scholars mined classical sources; in fact, Arabic translations of ancient Greek texts preserved much of classical civilization that would otherwise have been lost, and the later transmission of these works to the West helped to spark the Renaissance. Under Islam, theology and law became central concerns. Theology advanced as far as the comparative study of religions, while legal scholars took up theories of jurisprudence, mainly of Roman origin, and developed four related but distinct codes of law that are all considered legitimate in Sunni Islam — a development that provided flexibility within consensus.

- **Mathematics.** Islamic civilization adopted the decimal system, and the use of zero, from India, and transmitted it to the West. Algebra (from Arabic al-jabr), trigonometry, and analytical geometry were all first developed by Arab scholars.

- **Science.** Arab scholars made particular contributions in chemistry, where they introduced the concept of the objective experiment. In astronomy, Arab observatories made observations accurate enough to determine, very closely, the size of the earth and of degrees of latitude and longitude. Optics was another area in which Arab science made remarkable strides, laying the foundation for later progress in Europe.

- **Medicine.** Arabic medical texts such as that of Ibn-Sina (Avicenna), 980–1037, were used in Europe until the seventeenth century. From the early ninth century hospitals and medical schools were established, as well as the first pharmacies and the first pharmacopoeia. The theory of infection was first propounded by an Arab physician; the first textbook in ophthalmology came from the Islamic world (Hitti 1970a: 363–9).

- **Arts.** Though Islam in its monotheistic strictures forbade use of the human image, architecture and decorative arts flourished and produced masterpieces from the Taj Mahal in India to the Alhambra in Spain. European medieval architecture was heavily inspired by Arab models (for example, the Gothic style). Musical influences included not only many instruments (lute, guitar, cymbals, tambourine, timbal, horn, rebec), but also advances in music theory and notation.

- **Geography.** Islamic civilization at its peak carried on commerce with the farthest reaches of the known world, from China and the East Indies to Central Asia and Scandinavia to East Africa. Baghdad, in its days of grandeur, boasted
“miles of wharves” with “hundreds of vessels,” carrying to the Abbasid capital the finest goods from around the world (Hitti 1970b: 305). Muslim traders and sailors thus became acquainted with regions only dimly known in Europe, and Muslim geographers were able to fill in the map much more thoroughly. The traveler sometimes known as “the Arab Marco Polo” (Muhammad ibn Abdullah ibn Battutah, 1304–77) not only traveled much further than Marco Polo, and earlier; he also was able during most of his journeys to remain within the comfortable but extensive World of Islam!

The scope of Arab civilization and the nature of its contributions to Europe are reflected in the many English words that come from Arabic. Some of these are: admiral, alchemy, alcohol, alcove, algebra, algorism, alkali, almanac, amber, arsenal, azimut, candy, carafe, check, cipher, coffee, cotton, lute, magazine, nadir, orange, rice, saffron, sherbet, sugar, syrup, tariff, zenith, zero. We might also add Arabic numerals, arabesque design, cordovan leather, Damascus steel and damask fabrics, Mocha coffee, Moorish architecture, morocco leather, muslin cloth (from Mosul), and Toledo steel.

The ascendancy of Arab civilization is dramatically expressed by Philip Hitti, who notes that tenth-century Cordova, in Muslim Spain,

took its place as the most cultured city in Europe and, with Constantinople and Baghdad, as one of the three cultural centers of the world. With its one hundred and thirteen thousand homes, twenty-one suburbs, seventy libraries and numerous bookshops, mosques and palaces, it acquired international fame and inspired awe and admiration in the hearts of travelers. It enjoyed miles of paved streets illuminated by lights from the bordering houses whereas, seven hundred years after this time there was not so much as one public lamp in London, and in Paris, centuries subsequently, whoever stepped over his threshold on a rainy day stepped up to his ankles in mud. (Hitti 1970a: 526)

The Rise of the West

Islamic Arab civilization, by any account, was for several centuries an astounding success. What, then, explains the long period of decline that followed? As the title of Bernard Lewis’s book asks, What Went Wrong? (Lewis 2002).

Many explanations are offered. What seems clear is that from about the tenth or eleventh centuries the pace of progress began to slow, and the first signs of stagnation appeared. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries there was a “Closing of the Gates” regarding new interpretations of religion or religious law, creating a resistance to innovation that was reinforced by the religious control of education. Economic decline is attributed to a number of factors: the inefficiency of military feudalism and tax farming that removed incentives, the shifting of trade with the opening of new sea routes to Asia and to the New World, the appearance of potent European sea power protecting these routes and closing off the core Middle East. Another factor was political instability and internal strife within the Islamic world, weakening Islamic society and leaving it vulnerable to outside exploitation. Finally, there is the intrusion of the outside world, especially the devastating invasions of the Crusaders, beginning at the end of the eleventh century, and of the Mongols in the middle of the thirteenth.

Some Arab scholars have also blamed the Turks. In chapter 1 we noted the rise of the Turks, originally as slave soldiers from Central Asia, beginning in the eleventh century. Blaming the Turks may be unfair; known as redoubtable warriors, they conquered and Islamized Anatolia (present-day Turkey), something that Arab armies had been unable to accomplish. It was the Turkish Mamluk regime in Cairo that stemmed the Mongol invasion, in a battle in present-day Palestine, and evicted the last of the Crusaders. And the Ottoman Turks conquered Constantinople and much of southeastern Europe for Islam, twice threatening the city of Vienna and effectively shielding the core Middle East from Europe during a period when European power was on the rise. Nevertheless, it was
also the Ottoman Empire, during the latter half of its existence, that presided over the final period of decline and penetration of Western power into the Islamic heartland. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire was known as the “Sick Man” of Europe, and European diplomacy wrestled with the “Eastern Question”: who would get to pick up the pieces when it finally collapsed?

Perhaps there is a natural ebb and flow in the succession of dominant civilizations, as Bernard Lewis suggests: “Today, for the time being ... the dominant civilization is Western, and Western standards therefore define modernity.” But at the same time, “there have been other dominant civilizations in the past; there will no doubt be others in the future” (Lewis 2002: 150). Whatever the reasons why the Arab world once led the West, but no longer does, the historical fact is that there was a dramatic and (from the Arab perspective) demeaning reversal of roles. At the dawn of the twentieth century, Arabs, like Jews, looked back on a past grandeur that stood in stark contrast to the humiliations and sufferings of the present. Recognition of this reality is essential to an understanding of the Arab–Israel conflict.

Arabs and other Muslims had, with justification, long regarded Europeans as culturally backward. Harun al-Rashid (786–809), the illustrious Caliph who ruled Baghdad in its most dazzling days, addressed the Byzantine Emperor as “Nicephorus, the dog of a Roman ... son of an infidel mother” (Hitti 1970a: 300). The Toledan judge Said, in the tenth century, wrote of Europeans that “because the sun does not shed its rays directly over their heads, their climate is cold and atmosphere clouded. Consequently their temperaments have become cold and their humors rude, while their bodies have grown large, their complexion light and their hair long. They lack withal sharpness of wit and penetration of intellect, while stupidity and folly prevail among them” (Hitti 1970b: 526–7). Needless to say, the Crusades did not improve Arab perceptions of the Nordic barbarians, whose only notable skills seemed to lie in weaponry and warfare. Arabs were unlikely to forget the story of Ma’arra, in present-day Lebanon, where, according to the Crusaders’ own account, “our troops boiled pagan adults in cooking-pots; they impaled children on spits and devoured them grilled” (Maalouf 1984: 39). An Arab historian born in a neighboring city later wrote: “All those who were well-informed about the Franks [Franks; European Christians] saw them as beasts superior in courage and fighting ardor but in nothing else, just as animals are superior in strength and aggression” (Maalouf 1984: 39).

Arab armies ultimately defeated and expelled the Crusaders over the course of two centuries. But deep hostility remained, especially on the Islamic side, where the Crusades remained a much more potent memory. In the following period there was little contact, so Arabs were unaware of the startling changes taking place in Europe. The Ottomans used the Christian populations they controlled in the Balkans as a source of slaves. With this attitude, they were hardly prepared to deal with a new post-Renaissance Europe mounting a new and much more formidable threat. The loss of Spain and Sicily to Christian reconquest, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, was a signal that the power balance was shifting. Another was the fact that, after unsuccessfully besieging Vienna in 1683, the Ottoman Empire suffered a series of military reversals in the succeeding century, mostly against Russia, that left it much reduced and embattled. “In the late fifteenth [century],” writes a leading historian, “the disciplined professional army of the sultan, using firearms, had been a match for any in Europe... In the last quarter of the [eighteenth] century, however, the situation began to change rapidly and dramatically, as the gap between the technical skills of some western and northern European countries and those of the rest of the world grew wider” (Hourani 1991: 259).

The biggest shock came with Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798, generally regarded as the date that Western colonialism arrived in the Middle East. The easy French victories over Ottoman forces demonstrated not only technological advantage, but also superiority in organization, training, and strategy. Muslims – Arabs and Turks alike – were suddenly faced with a Europe that had surpassed them in many areas.
There were frantic efforts at quick reform, as regimes tried to close the gap by copying Western institutions and methods. In Egypt, itself the founder of a new dynasty, Muhammad Ali (who ruled from 1805 to 1848) changed the face of his country and at one point even threatened to overthrow his nominal sovereign, the Ottoman Sultan. The Ottoman regime carried out its own reform program, the Tanzimat, in mid-century. But the attempt to acquire modern technology, without first building the social and cultural infrastructure and values underlying this technology, was a mixed success. Much of the technology could be transferred, but attempts to liberalize institutions and cultures made little or no headway. The fact that these liberal values were associated with foreign, Western, Christian intruders was no help.

The intruders themselves seemed less interested in promoting their ideas than in expanding their control. The British took over the strategic port of Aden, on the southwestern tip of the Arabian peninsula, in 1839. They took control of Egypt, informally, in 1882, and during the 1890s they brought most of the petty rulers of the Persian Gulf into their orbit as protectors, as a result of which these anachronistic sheikhdoms and emirates - Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Oman - are independent states today. The French conquered Algiers in 1830, gained a foothold in Lebanon in 1861, established a protectorate over Tunisia in 1881, and finally moved into Morocco in 1911. The Russians, in the course of the century, were expanding their control of Muslim areas in both the Caucasus and Central Asia, and were bringing increasing pressure on the Ottoman Empire for leverage in the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, the straits controlling passage between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. And, as already noted, the European provinces of the Ottoman Empire had all won their independence by 1914.

The first stirrings of Arab nationalism had been heard in 1880 (see p. 20), and by the turn of the century a small but visible movement had emerged. If the Turks could not protect the Islamic heartland from European depredations and cultural penetration, other solutions had to be found. Some early reformers turned to pan-Islam, urging a reunification and renewal of the Islamic world that would enable it to stand up to the new challenge. Others turned to more localized identities to rally resistance to Western colonialism; in Egypt, for example, a distinctive sense of community as Egyptians could be invoked. But others borrowed from the West itself, applying newly coined concepts of “nation” and “nation-state” to their own reality. Were they not “Arabs,” sharing a common language, common culture, and common history as heirs to a great world civilization, from Morocco to Iraq? Were they less entitled than Europeans (Serbs, Montenegrins, Romanians, Bulgarians, or Albanians) to national self-determination as a nation-state based upon this ethnic identity? The term “Arab,” which had been used to refer to beduin or to inhabitants of the Arabian peninsula, was now being embraced as a unifying identity by all Arabic speakers, apart from some smaller minorities such as Jews or Armenians who had their own distinct identities.

Arab Christians were especially prominent among early promoters of Arab nationalism. Educated Arab Christians were, first of all, more attuned to Western political ideas and ideologies such as nationalism. But, more importantly, forging a common identity as “Arabs” made them part of a political force that submerged religious differences, while as Christians they would remain an exposed island in an Islamic ocean.

The idea of a unified Arab state, or pan-Arabism, was of course a challenge to the legitimacy of Turkish rule over Arabs, which was justified by the Sultan’s status as Caliph of all Muslims. The Arab nationalists saw Turkish rule, therefore, as unjust, and advocated the overthrow of the Ottoman regime. Because of Turkish domination, this could not be done openly, and in the last two decades of the nineteenth century Arab nationalism was largely confined to small secret societies of Arab intellectuals, primarily in Beirut and Damascus.

The small size of the nationalist movement, and the fact that Arabic speakers did not all see themselves as “Arabs,” does not mean that there was no sense of collective identity
or political consciousness among the populations under Ottoman rule. There were in fact several levels of common identity: as Muslims, as Ottoman subjects, as members of particular clans or kinship groups, as residents of particular areas. In addition, there was identity as an indigenous population resisting outside (usually Western) intrusions. Opposition to foreigners may be the most basic level of community feeling; there was no absence of it in Ottoman territory in the late nineteenth century. This was particularly true in the “Palestinian” provinces, to which we now turn.

**Palestine and Palestinism**

As noted before, Ottoman administrative divisions did not correspond to historical and geographic definitions of “Palestine.” After 1888, the southern area of historic Palestine was governed as the _mutasarriflik_ of Jerusalem, ruled directly by Constantinople, while central and northern areas were organized as the _sanjaks_ of Nablus and Acre, subdivisions of the _vilayet_ of Beirut, and the area east of the Jordan River was part of the _vilayet_ of Damascus. The population of the Jerusalem, Nablus, and Acre districts at the beginning of the 1880s was slightly under half a million, with Arabs (Muslims and Christians) accounting for over 95 percent of this total. The population was still predominantly (two-thirds) rural.

There is a tendency to read Palestinian history backwards, looking in the nineteenth century for the roots of later failures and disasters. The result is a skewed analysis that can be highly misleading. Palestinian Arab society underwent important changes during this period, many of which contributed to a process of building a national consciousness. Donna Robinson Divine notes that “with their attention directed to explaining the loss of a Palestinian state in 1948, [scholars] have failed to appreciate Palestine’s nineteenth-century history as a period of significant development” (Divine 1994: 2).

On the international level the Ottoman Empire was in decline as its relative military and economic standing sank, along with its ability to resist penetration by a rising Europe. But this does not mean that there was no progress, or at least change, domestically. European penetration itself produced important innovations and stimulated reform. Ottoman attempts to reform and modernize – the _Tanzimat_ – were not entirely fruitless. Through a combination of internal pressures and external interventions, the Palestinian landscape at the end of the century was radically different from that of a century or only half a century earlier. Vast improvements in health standards, security, communication, transportation, government services, public administration, and judicial institutions transformed Palestinian life. Ottoman authority actually became more direct and effective than in the past, when the government had worked primarily through local sheikhs representing the clans and kinship groups that dominated traditional society. The Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II, who ruled from 1876 to 1909, focused particularly on keeping the loyalty of Arabs, the second largest ethnic group (after the Turks themselves) in his remaining Empire, and nowhere more than in Palestine – precisely because of outside interest in the Holy Land. In this the Turks were fairly successful; despite the inroads of Arab nationalism, most Arab subjects of the Sultan remained loyal during World War I – a fact one would not know from popular Western images of “Lawrence of Arabia” and the like.

Of course not all reforms had the intended result. An 1858 Land Law, with subsequent refinements, tried to regularize land ownership through a system of registration and taxation. The impact, however, was to transfer much communal land, which peasants had farmed for generations, to private ownership. A new class of wealthy, and often absentee, landowners emerged, along with a large number of landless tenants (including some who lost their land because they could not pay the new taxes). These landowners, along with notable urban families and merchants prospering in the growing cash economy, pushed aside the traditional clan-based leadership. At the same time the tenant farmers, with no legal claim to the land, became vulnerable to displacement if the land was sold to new owners. These new owners might
even be non-Ottoman citizens, as the government was under strong pressure from European powers to honor its obligation to allow land ownership by foreigners. This situation was a key factor in many large land purchases by the Zionist movement.

Aversion to non-Muslim foreigners – not just Jews, but all non-Muslim foreigners – was deeply rooted in Palestinian society. The legacy of the Crusades, only a dim memory in the Christian West, was very much alive in the Holy Land itself. European nations were not allowed to have a diplomatic presence in Jerusalem, and non-Muslim foreigners could not live there. Both of these bans were ended during Muhammad Ali’s control of Palestine in the 1830s, but the hostility remained; the first Western consuls in Jerusalem had to be protected by armed escorts. There were riots, in some cases, when European flags were raised or church bells were rung. Perhaps the most galling aspect of the growing European presence was the constant intervention by foreign consuls under the Capitulations (extraterritorial judicial powers) to protect not only their own citizens but also Ottoman citizens who shared their faith. Ottoman authorities tried to eliminate the Capitulations, but Western powers were not about to give up a lever that had proven so useful in promoting their own presence and balancing that of their rivals.

The Ottoman Empire’s international orientation was changing during this period. Earlier, Great Britain had propped up the Turks when they were threatened, organizing Great Power coalitions to force Muhammad Ali and his French backers out of Palestine and Syria in 1840, and to oppose Russia in the Crimean War of 1853–6. Russia was always the first concern in Constantinople, given the long history of conflict, but by the 1880s Britain and France had also emerged as major threats. The British occupation of Egypt (1882) was particularly important, and so was the growing strategic cooperation among Britain, France, and Russia. Consequently the Sultan, on the basis of the classic Middle Eastern adage that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” was turning to Germany, the new European power that opposed the other three. This put the Ottoman govern-

ment in a stronger position, of course, to resist the pressures of Britain and France on issues related to the Capitulations and the rights of foreign subjects on Ottoman territory.

While these developments were felt throughout the Ottoman Empire, in the Palestinian provinces the struggle was particularly acute. This was because it was in Palestine that the efforts of infiltration and penetration were most intense. The British might take military control of Egypt, but they were not trying to alter Egyptian society or demography – and anyway, the Ottomans had not really controlled Cairo for some time. In Palestine there was a growing sense among the population that they faced a particular threat because of Palestine’s unique significance. This is the beginning of a particular identity as Palestinians, in tandem with the other emerging national identity as Arabs. In the decades to come, the interplay between “Arab” and “Palestinian” identities played a key role in Palestinian discourse.

Baruch Kimmerling and Joel Migdal describe the first identity as “Palestinianism”: “the belief that the Arab population originating in the area of the Palestine mandate is distinct from other Arab groups, with a right to its own nation-state in that territory” (Kimmerling and Migdal 1993: p. xviii). The sense of Palestine as a distinct area derived from its religious importance and past use of the term in a geographic (if not political) sense, as well as the fact that it seemed to be a particular target for foreign penetration. These elements, furthermore, were present before the appearance of Zionism. It is sometimes claimed that Palestinian identity developed only in reaction to Zionism. This is inaccurate; while the rise of the Zionist movement reinforced Palestinianism, it did not create it. Even the resistance to foreign penetration was not new, as there were other “others” before Zionism (Europeans, Turks) who stimulated local patriotism (R. Khalidi 1997: 154).

First Encounters

How did the Arab population react to the early Zionist settlers? As we have seen, the first Zionists came at a time when the entire Ottoman Empire was engaged in a rearguard
defense against European threats from a number of quarters, internal and external. It was enough that the Zionists were European; they were seen as another front in the overall struggle. On the other hand, both Turks and Arabs regarded the British, the French, the Russians, and general Western cultural and economic penetration, as the major fronts; compared to these threats, the danger posed by a few thousand Jews posing as farmers seemed very puny.

The existing Palestinian Jewish community was assimilated into Arab culture, for the most part. The newcomers from Europe were too few for their presence to be felt, at first, by most Arabs. Where they settled, Zionists did encounter hostility and opposition locally. But this could be dismissed as a natural xenophobic response to strangers rather than a reaction to Zionism itself. The incidents were isolated and sporadic, and did not signal (Zionists reassured themselves) any general pattern of opposition to the idea of a Jewish home in Palestine. Of course Zionist settlers were trying to recruit more settlers, and were not likely to emphasize difficulties that, they thought, would in any event go away.

But, over time, resistance to Zionism grew as Zionism itself grew. Every new Jewish settlement had property disputes with neighbors, even when efforts were made to get agreed demarcation of property lines in advance. Another major source of conflict was the displacement from purchased land of tenant farmers who, in the wake of the 1858 Land Law, had lost rights to land cultivated by their families for generations. Offers of generous compensation, beyond that required by law, did not always work; some disputes dragged on for years. In the Arab view, this should hardly be surprising. There was a pattern here: that of an indigenous population reacting to alien intruders. This did not require that this population profess a common identity as “Arabs” or “Palestinians”; it required only that they felt threatened by an influx of outsiders. This common reaction appears in all ages and in all places; it does not require a modern sense of nationalism.

Arabs from neighboring villages attacked Petach Tikvah in 1886, Gedera in 1888, Yesud Ha’ma’alah in 1890, Rehovot in 1892, 1893, and 1899, Kastina in 1896, Jewish Jaffa in 1908, and Sajera in 1909. There were in every case specific triggers to the attacks, but the general pattern speaks for itself. Obviously the Arab population was hostile toward Jewish settlement in Palestine.

In June 1891 some 500 notable Arab figures in Jerusalem sent a petition to Constantinople demanding a halt to all Jewish immigration and all land sales to Jews. The immediate trigger was the threat of a new wave of Russian Jewish settlers. The Ottoman government responded sympathetically, forbidding the entry of Russian Jews in August of that year, and of all Jews in October (Mandel 1976: 39–40). Such decrees violated the Ottoman pledge of non-discrimination on the basis of religion or race and evoked sharp counter-pressure from European powers. Between this and the usual problems of enforcement, many new settlers made it into Palestine despite Ottoman policy (see chapter 2).

This was still several years before Theodore Herzl and the founding of the World Zionist Organization (WZO) made political Zionism a recognized and visible movement. On March 1, 1899, soon after the WZO’s establishment, a distinguished member of one of Jerusalem’s leading families, Yusuf Diya Pasha al-Khalidi, sent a letter to the Chief Rabbi of France, who was close to Herzl, challenging the Zionist program. Al-Khalidi began by acknowledging the historic Jewish link: “Who can challenge the rights of the Jews on Palestine? Good Lord, historically it is really your country.” But he then warned that neither the Muslim nor the Christian worlds would allow this to happen, and pleaded that the Zionist movement find a less problematic locale for its visions:

It is necessary, therefore, for the peace of the Jews in Turkey that the Zionist movement, in the geographic sense of the word, stops... Good Lord, the world is vast enough, there are still uninhabited countries where one could settle millions of poor Jews who may perhaps become happy there and one day constitute a nation. That would perhaps be the best, the most rational solution to the Jewish question. But in the name of God, let Palestine be left in peace. (Mandel 1976: 47–8)
Herzl responded to al-Khalidi with the familiar argument that Jewish settlement of Palestine would bring benefits to the existing non-Jewish population: “It is their well-being, their individual wealth which we will increase by bringing in our own” (W. Khalidi 1987: 92).

By this time expressions of Arab opposition to Zionist settlement were coming with increasing frequency. In the same year, 1899, Muhammad Tahir al-Husayni, Mufti of Jerusalem (and father of Hajj Amin al-Husayni, Mufti of Jerusalem and dominant Palestinian Arab leader during the British Mandate period) proposed that all Jews who had entered the Jerusalem mutasarriflik since 1891 should be expelled, and that terror should be employed to achieve that end. Furthermore, the debate had spread to Arab intellectual circles outside Palestine. Muhammad Rashid Rida, a Syrian living and writing in Egypt who is considered one of the leading pre-nationalists in the Arab world, wrote in an Egyptian newspaper in 1898:

You complacent ones, raise your heads and open your eyes. Look at what peoples and nations do. Are you happy to see the newspapers of every country reporting that the poor of the weakest peoples [the Jews], whom the governments of all nations are expelling, master so much knowledge and understanding of civilization methods that they are able to possess and colonize your country, and turn its masters into laborers and its wealthy into poor? (Muslih 1988: 75)

The evidence is overwhelming that the Arab inhabitants of Ottoman Palestine, far from feeling indifferent or permissive toward the immigration of European Jews to their homeland, consistently opposed such immigration. Had they been able to settle the question democratically, there is little doubt that they would have voted to exclude Zionist settlers – and for that matter any “Western” interlopers. The Ottoman government, responding both to Arab demands and to its own interests, tried to carry out such a policy. The fact that it failed was due, at least in part, to political realities beyond its control.

The Debut of Arab Nationalism

In the last decade before World War I the ferment in the Ottoman Empire increased, Western pressures intensified, and the Arab–Zionist conflict went public. Tied to all of this was the appearance of Arab nationalism as a significant force in the region.

In 1905 Najib Azuri, a Lebanese Christian who had served in the Ottoman bureaucracy in Jerusalem, published in Paris Le Reveil de la Nation Arabe (The Awakening of the Arab Nation), the first “textbook” of secular Arab nationalism. Azuri called for an Arab state, independent of the Turks, from Iraq to the Suez (the Egyptians were not yet considered “Arab”). Palestine received considerable attention; in the passage quoted as an epigraph to this chapter, Azuri predicted that “the fate of the entire world” would depend on the outcome of the Arab–Jewish struggle, which would continue until one side had won a total victory (a “zero-sum” view of the conflict). This was a rather remarkable projection, given that both national movements were still in an embryonic stage. The book includes many anti-Zionist and even anti-Semitic passages, indicating that from the outset some Arab nationalists saw the Zionist issue as a central part of their program.

In 1908 Azuri published an article proposing that the mutasarriflik of Jerusalem be raised to the status of a vilayet, thus making Palestine a political unit on the highest level in the Ottoman Empire. This was necessary, he said, because “the progress of the land of Palestine depends on it” (R. Khalidi 1997: 28, 151–2). This may have been the first political, and not just geographic, use of the term.

In July 1908 Ottoman army officers forced Sultan Abdul Hamid II to restore the constitution of 1876, which he had suspended in 1878; in the following year the Sultan was deposed. This “Young Turk” Revolution brought out into the open both the growing Arab nationalist movement and the growing conflict over Zionist settlement in Palestine. Arab leaders expected that a restored Parliament and other liberal
reforms would give them a greater voice in affairs of state; the Young Turks, however, were interested primarily in preserving the Empire, and in pursuit of their own nationalist visions embarked on a campaign of “Turkification” among minorities. This only spurred Arab nationalists to redouble their efforts, this time as an organized and visible political movement offering a clear and compelling alternative to the Ottoman framework: a unified Arab state. While most Arabs remained loyal Ottoman subjects in World War I, the strength of Arab nationalism was sufficient for the British to instigate an “Arab Revolt” against the Ottoman enemy.

The Palestinian provinces were at the center of this turmoil, with both Arab nationalism and “Palestine” achieving greater visibility and greater support. The first major Palestinian newspapers, al-Karmil in Haifa and al-Quds in Jerusalem, appeared in 1908; in 1911 Filastin was founded in Jaffa. The terms “Palestine” and “Palestinian” were coming into general use, and the Zionist threat received increasing attention not just in Palestine but also in neighboring Arab countries. Rashid Khalidi’s survey of ten Arab newspapers (two Palestinian papers, five in Beirut, two in Cairo, and one in Damascus), in the 1908–14 period, found over 600 articles dealing with the Zionist issue. By this time, clearly, Zionism was on the Arab agenda. Furthermore, the Arab view of Zionism was uniformly negative in all but one of the newspapers (the exception was one of the Cairo papers) (R. Khalidi 1997: 122–4).

In the restored Ottoman Parliament, the deputy from Jaffa, Hafiz al-Said, raised the issue of Zionism in June 1909. The two deputies from Jerusalem both spoke against Jewish settlement in Palestine. One of them, Ruhi al-Khalidi, later told a Hebrew newspaper that individual Jews should be allowed to enter freely.

But to establish Jewish colonies is another question. The Jews have the financial capacity. They will be able to buy many tracts of land, and displace the Arab farmers from their land and their fathers’ heritage. However, we did not conquer this land from you. We conquered it from the Byzantines who ruled it then. We do not owe anything to the Jews. The Jews were not here when we conquered the country. (Mandel 1976: 77).

In a similar parliamentary debate in 1911, the second deputy from Jerusalem, Said al-Husayni, contended that “the Zionists’ aim was to create a Jewish state extending from Palestine and Syria to Iraq” (Mandel 1976: 113).

Arab opposition to Zionism also tied the Zionists to the Capitulations and the special protection that settlers were receiving from foreign powers. Al-Asma‘i, a Jaffa newspaper, declared that “they harm the local population and wrong them, by relying on the special rights accorded to foreign powers in the Ottoman Empire and on the corruption and treachery of the local administration” (Mandel 1976: 81). Shukri al-Asali, the governor of Nazareth, wrote a long and bitter open letter in 1910 about the disloyalty of the Zionists:

They have deceived the Government with lying and falsehood when they enroll themselves as Ottoman subjects in the registers, for they continue to carry foreign passports which protect them; and whenever they go to Ottoman courts, they produce their passports and summon foreign protection. . . . If the Government does not set a limit to this torrential stream, no time will pass before you see that Palestine has become a property of the Zionist Organization and its associates. (Mandel 1976: 89)

What is apparently the first poem directed against the Zionist intrusion appeared in Filastin in November 1913. It was written by Sheikh Sulayman al-Taji, an Arab political figure from Jaffa, and it demonstrates that, even at this early stage, the objective conflict over land was beginning to evoke subjective prejudices and hatreds:

Jews, sons of clinking gold, stop your deceit;
We shall not be cheated into bartering away our country!
Shall we hand it over, meekly,
while we still have some spirit left?
Shall we cripple ourselves?
The Jews, the weakest of all peoples and the least of them,
are haggling with us for our land;
How can we slumber on?
We know what they want
– and they have the money, all of it. . .
And you, O Caliph, guardian of the faithful,
have mercy on us, your shield. . . .
Bearer of the Crown, does it please you
that we should witness our country
being bought from us, wrenched from us?

(Mandel 1976: 175–6)

Palestinians and other Arabs, by this time, had reached a fairly solid and consistent consensus about the project of a Jewish “return” to their ancestral homeland. Put simply: Palestine is at the heart of the Arab world, and has had an Islamic and Arab majority population since the ninth century – for a millennium. It still has a 90 percent Arab majority. If the right of self-determination has any meaning at all, Palestinian Arabs must be permitted to defend their homes, their livelihoods, their culture, and their way of life against the uninvited intrusion of an alien nation that openly declares its goal of taking over their country by transforming its demography. Jews have enjoyed the status of dhimmi (protected people) in Islamic lands, so long as they accepted the existing framework and assimilated culturally. The Zionists are a different matter. Zionists come from Europe, infected with the colonialist mentality that justifies the conquest and subjugation of non-Western peoples and lands. They have no intention of adjusting to the Palestinian culture and way of life; instead they intend to impose their designs upon the local people. We will never accept a non-Muslim state in the heart of the Arab and Islamic worlds, and so long as this is their goal, there is an irreconcilable conflict between us.

By the time World War I erupted, therefore, the seeds had been sown, and the basic outlines of future conflict were evident to a careful observer. The issues had been defined, and most of the arguments had been laid out already. What remained was for these doleful projections to play out with the stately inevitability of a Greek tragedy.