



THE PARTITION OF PALESTINE

By Bernard Wasserstein



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One Palestine, Complete was the title of a book about the early history of the British mandate in Palestine by the Israeli historian, Tom Segev. It arises from a true anecdote about the first High Commissioner (governor) under the mandate, Sir Herbert Samuel. On 30 June 1920 he arrived at Government House in Jerusalem to replace the head of the British military occupation administration, General Sir Louis Bols. He was taken aback when Bols demanded that, upon taking formal possession of the country, Samuel should sign a "receipt." Bols presented him with a piece of paper bearing the words "Received, one Palestine, complete." Samuel duly added his signature but, a prudent man, he added the letters "E&OE." That is an abbreviation standing for "Errors and omissions excepted" that used to be appended to commercial documents as a safety reservation. The document was later sold at auction in New York for five thousand dollars. Given the unsettled history of Palestine under British rule over the ensuing three decades, Samuel's caution was probably justified.

I want to focus for a moment on the word "complete." Over the past century, there have been repeated proposals for the partition of Palestine. But there has never been general agreement about what is surely a necessary preliminary to any carving of Palestine into two or more segments, namely what constitutes "one Palestine, complete."

Geographical realities have complicated all the debates over partition in the course of the past century. Palestine, after all, however defined, is a very small country. The sovereign area of Israel plus what is now called the West Bank and the Gaza strip altogether comprise a total of just 10,850 square miles, of which the West Bank is 2,860 square miles and the Gaza Strip just 139 square miles. Palestine is thus less than a quarter the size of Pennsylvania, which has 45,300 square miles – and that ranks only 33rd in size among American states.

Moreover, within this small area, Palestine is divided into several distinct physical, climatic, and cultivation zones. The coastal strip from Gaza to Haifa and the series of valleys stretching inland from Haifa contain rich agricultural land. Here in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were established the citrus plantations that provided the bulk of the country's export earnings in the mandatory period (74 percent of the total by value in 1939). Here too most of the important Jewish land purchases were made and Jewish settlements established. This is where the bulk of the Jewish immigrants came to live, side by side with an already substantial Arab population. Next we have the hill country of Galilee and the spine stretching down through Samaria and Judea. This includes important cities such as Nablus, Jerusalem, and Hebron, but in general is less densely populated than the coastal plain. Olive groves rather than citrus predominated here. Except for Jerusalem, where Jews were the largest group even before the Zionists arrived, Arabs were a majority in this area. Finally, we have the sparsely populated areas of the Judean desert on the eastern fringe and the Negev desert in the south. Apart from semi-nomadic Beduin, few people lived there.

Into this compact but complex territory there came to be packed a population that grew from about 600,000 a century ago to twelve million today. This twentyfold increase is one of the most rapid for any country in the world. The coast between Gaza and Haifa ranks with places like Hong Kong as one of the most densely populated territories on earth. Most of this area is now urban or semi-urban. In 1914 about ten percent of the population of Palestine was Jewish and the rest mainly Arab. Today, in the area between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean, about half the people are Jewish and half Arab. Given the virtual end of net Jewish immigration over the past decade and the higher Arab than Jewish birth rate, the Arab population is already now moving into a majoritarian position.

It is with these geographic and demographic facts that proponents of partition have had to grapple. One consequence is that Palestine could never be partitioned simply by a line drawn through the middle, whether north/south like Germany between 1949 and 1990 or east-west, like Korea at the 38th parallel since 1948.

Moreover, the mingling of Arab and Jewish populations in different parts of the country meant that no straightforward Gordian cut could be devised that would separate out the two ethnic groups into contiguous states without either forced migrations or large minority enclaves. Hence the complexity of all the partition proposals that have ever been put forward.

The first significant proposal for a partition of Palestine was offered in 1916 by the Anglo-French agreement known as the Sykes-Picot pact. This was, of course, devised as a partition not between Jews and Arabs but between the British and the French. At the time, Allied forces were battling the Turks on the Sinai front. The British were engaged in simultaneous, tortuous discussions not only with the French but also with the Russians, the Italians, the Sherifian Arabs (followers of the Sherif Hussein of Mecca), and the Zionists over the future of the Ottoman Empire's possessions in the Fertile Crescent in the event of an Allied victory. Sir Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot agreed that central Palestine would be internationalized – but exactly what that would mean was left unclear.

Then came, in rapid succession, the Lloyd George government's Balfour Declaration in favor of Zionism in November 1917, the dramatic British conquest of Jerusalem in December, the final defeat of the Turks in October 1918 and the ensuing collapse of the Ottoman empire, the establishment of a British military regime in Palestine west of the River Jordan, of a French administration in Lebanon, and of an Arab one, headed by the Emir Faisal (son of Sherif Hussein), in Damascus.

When Samuel assumed power in Palestine in 1920, his authority was limited by the Foreign Office to the zone west of the Jordan that had previously been under the control of the British military administration. In July 1920 the French unceremoniously booted Faisal out of Damascus. He was consoled by the British with the throne of British-controlled Mesopotamia (today's Iraq). But his brother Abdullah, vowing revenge against the French, led a force of his Beduin followers from the Hejaz into the semi-anarchic area east of the Jordan. The British feared that a clash between Abdullah and the French might provide a pretext for their Gallic allies, now their bitter rivals for hegemony in the Near East, to implant themselves in that area. French rule over Transjordan would upset the Sykes-Picot treaty by cutting off British-controlled Mesopotamia from Palestine.

In 1921, therefore, the Colonial Secretary, Winston Churchill, made a deal with Abdullah. In return for a promise not to attack the French in Syria, Abdullah was installed as Emir of Transjordan under the effective supervision of British advisers. The British mandate for Palestine was expanded eastwards to embrace Transjordan, with the proviso that the clauses of the draft mandate allowing for the establishment of a Jewish National Home under British protection should not apply east of the Jordan. The arrangement was enshrined in the Churchill White Paper (policy statement) of 1922, accepted by the Zionist Organization, and approved by the League of Nations.

Transjordan was thus, [as Adam Garfinkle correctly pointed out earlier](#),¹ added on to the mandate in 1921-2. It is important to establish this clearly because of a mythic history of Palestine, embraced by the Revisionist Zionist movement (ultra-nationalist ideological ancestors of today's ruling Likud party in Israel) and to be found in many uncritical books on the subject: this has it that these events marked the first "partition" of Palestine. If the greater part of the "Palestine, complete" was lopped off at that time, so the argument goes, any demand for a further partition (a.k.a. the "two-state solution") must be weakened to the point of illegitimacy. But the reality is that Palestine was not partitioned in 1921-2. The Balfour Declaration had not specified any particular area for the Jewish National Home that was to be set up "in Palestine." Samuel's administration, when he signed that receipt in 1920, extended only as far as the Jordan River, by order of the Foreign Secretary, Lord Curzon. Palestine was expanded, not partitioned, by Winston Churchill.

¹ "Origins of the Palestine Mandate," by Adam Garfinkle, *Footnotes*, November 2014.

A genuine partition of Palestine entered the realm of realistic political discussion in 1937. Following the outbreak of a major Arab revolt against British rule and against Zionism, a Royal Commission, headed by Earl Peel, recommended that Palestine be divided into a Jewish state (a small area on the coast), a larger Arab state (to be linked with Transjordan), and a residual British mandatory area (including an area stretching from Jerusalem to the coast). The scheme was dismissed out of hand by the Arabs. It was also rejected by the Zionists. Nevertheless, the Zionist Congress, under the leadership of Chaim Weizmann, accepted the principle of partition while demanding more generous borders for the Jewish state. The plan was rife with difficulties, one of them being that, at any rate at the outset, the proposed Jewish state would have only the barest majority of Jews. As it turned out, the idea was shelved and ultimately abandoned by the British in 1939, under the strategic pressures of an impending war.

During and after World War II a variety of further partition plans were put forward but it was not until 1947 that one came close to implementation. This was the proposal of the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine, constituted after Britain, despairing of an agreement between Arabs and Jews, had decided to turn the mandate over to the successor organization to the League of Nations. The UN plan provided for a larger Jewish state than that proposed in 1937. Under this plan too Jerusalem would have had a special status as an international city under the authority of the United Nations, for at least ten years. The borders proposed for the new states were intended to provide for the largest possible majority of Jews within the Jewish area plus sufficient space for the Jewish population to grow by means of immigration. The zigzag pattern of frontiers, apparently creating two inextricably tangled states, was deliberately intended by UNSCOP to compel the two sides to cooperate with each other. This expectation proved woefully unrealistic.

The partition plan was endorsed by the UN General Assembly on 29 November 1947. The Arabs rejected the idea bag and baggage. The Zionists accepted it publicly but privately prepared for war. The British ostensibly refused to take responsibility for imposing partition. Secretly, however, as Avi Shlaim showed in his book *Collusion Across the Jordan*, they sponsored negotiations between the Zionists and Abdullah's regime in Transjordan. The British, after all, had no interest in allowing their sworn enemy, the Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin al-Husseini, the leader of the Arab revolt in the 1930s, to take over the putative Palestinian Arab state. On this point the Zionists and Abdullah too were of one mind. Their secret talks led to a tacit understanding: Abdullah would offer only token resistance to the establishment of the Jewish state. In return, Israel would allow him to take over most of the area designated for the Palestinian Arab state and add it to his domain. At the time what came to be called the "West Bank" was almost entirely Arab-populated. There was no agreement, however, over Jerusalem. The holy city was bitterly contested between Transjordanian and Israeli forces. In the end it was partitioned for nineteen years between the mainly Arab eastern districts and mainly Jewish western ones.

In the 1948-9 Israel-Arab war, Israel succeeded in expanding the area under her control so as to provide for more defensible borders. The greater part of the Arab population of that area was expelled or fled, leaving a large Jewish majority in the new state. The refugees found shelter in camps in the West Bank, the Gaza strip (under Egyptian military rule), Syria, and Lebanon. The camps developed into semi-permanent slums. Descendants of the 1948 refugees largely remain to this day in those squalid dwellings which they refuse to call home. Unlike the Jewish immigrants to Israel from Europe and Arab lands, the Palestinian refugees did not, in the main, integrate into their new surroundings. They retained, if anything reinforced, their sense of a distinctive identity and their suppurating historical grievance. No Israeli-Arab peace plan, however attractive otherwise, that failed to take account of and somehow address their demand for a 'right of return' could have any hope of success.

After the Israel-Arab armistice agreements of 1949 the word partition faded for a time from discussion of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Most Arabs continued to reject the very existence of Israel. Israel refused to contemplate surrender of any territory or the return of significant numbers of Arab refugees to their former homes in Israel. In fact, by one means or another, more Arabs were compelled to leave Israel over the next few years as the armistice lines hardened into real borders.

The war of 1967 marked another decisive watershed. Israel conquered the whole of the remainder of former mandatory Palestine plus the Syrian Golan Heights and the Sinai Peninsula, Egyptian sovereign territory. Golan and Sinai held only small populations, in neither case Palestinians. But the West Bank and Gaza were heavily populated. Suddenly 36 percent of all the people living under Israeli rule were Arabs. Thereafter the proportion rose inexorably. So long as the Arab minority had no control over their own political destiny, the conflict could not and cannot be resolved.

Ever since 1967, therefore, Israel has faced the dilemma of whether to remain in occupation of all or part of these lands, with their Arab populations, or to retract to something closer to her pre-1967 borders. By successive agreements with Egypt, culminating in a peace treaty in 1979, she withdrew from Sinai in stages between 1973 and 1985. Following a 'disengagement'

agreement with Syria in 1974, she removed her forces also from a small sliver of land on the Golan Heights.

After the surprise agreement between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1993, it seemed for a time that a de facto partition of Palestine into two states was in the making. In the late 1990s Israel conducted limited withdrawals from parts of the West Bank and in 2005 she withdrew her 11,000 settlers and all her forces from the Gaza Strip.

But in the first decade of this millennium the Israeli-Palestinian peace process stalled. Peacemakers were pulled apart by violent extremists on both sides. The Palestinian Authority, although granted limited self-rule in the West Bank and Gaza, failed to make the transition to sovereign statehood. Israel proved unwilling to withdraw from the whole of the West Bank. Although the two sides came quite close to a deal in 2000, large differences remained: over security issues; over Israeli settlements in the West Bank (whose population today is 325,000 – not counting East Jerusalem); over the exact path of a new border; and over Jerusalem.

Over the past decade, in an effort to counter terrorism, Israel has constructed a massive “security barrier” near the so-called “green line,” the 1949-1967 Israel-Jordan armistice line. In many places, however, this barrier extended far into the West Bank. The “great wall of Palestine” turned many Palestinian towns and villages into enclaves surrounded by concrete. It also divided parts of Jerusalem. The city as a whole was cut off from the rest of the West Bank by Israeli checkpoints. The wall has created a kind of de facto partition – not between sovereign states but rather between Israel and a kind of Palestinian satrapy. An aesthetic and ecological monstrosity, it has an aura of permanence. My prediction is that it will last no longer than other such walls in history.

The “two state solution” now seems further away than ever. Bitter civil unrest and repeated mini-wars have punctuated the history of the Holy Land over the past fifteen years and show no sign of ending. Religio-nationalist fanatics hold sway over large segments of both Israeli and Palestinian society. Is partition then off the agenda?

Partition is often presented as the most natural, logical, fair and reasonable way of resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. It may be all those things. But it is not simple. If it were, it would surely already have happened at some point in the past hundred years. In fact, as even this briefest of surveys demonstrates, its realization is bedeviled with difficulties. It is especially incumbent on those of us (among whom I include myself) who advocate this solution to recognize the obstacles and, where possible, to suggest practicable ways to try to overcome them. Partition is no panacea. It is rather, as Churchill is said to have remarked about democracy, the worst of all possible systems... except for all the others.

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