

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 *dhimmi* (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, contrary to the popular image, the gap between mainstream opinion on the two sides has actually narrowed over time. 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, so 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 “idealist” 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 national-

ism 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 Yisraell/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 Yisraell/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.

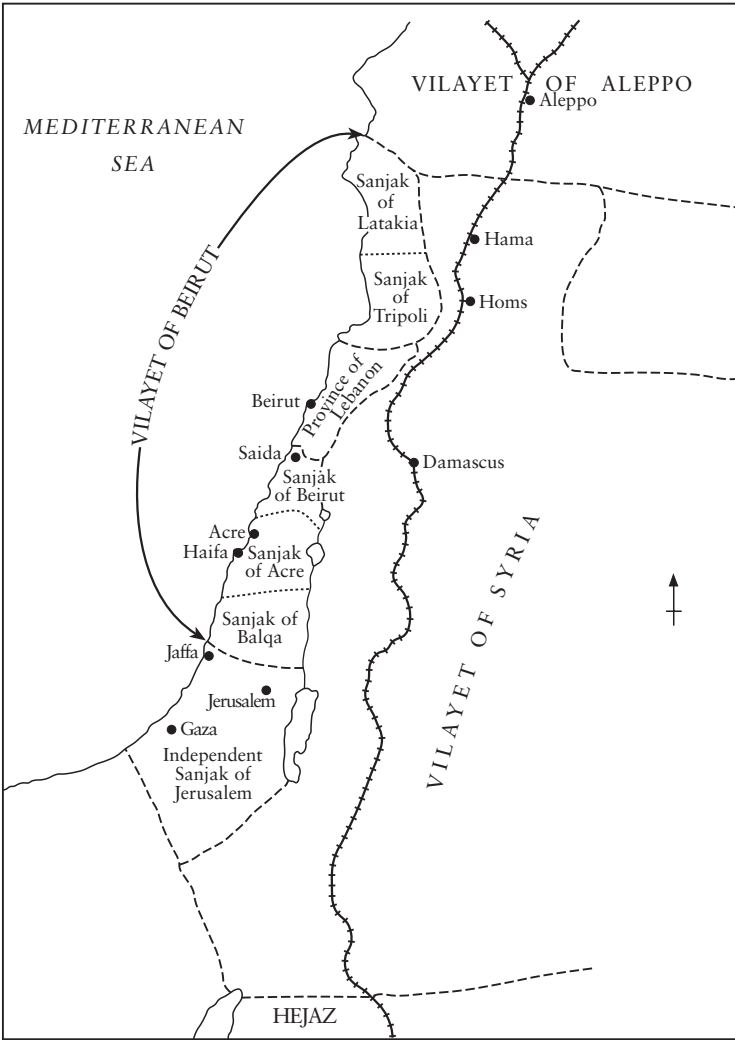
The issue was especially sensitive in the “Palestinian” provinces. Since the Crusades, Jerusalem had been closed to European diplomats, and foreign non-Muslims had no right of permanent residence there. Only when Muhammad Ali of Egypt controlled the city were the first European consuls allowed in Jerusalem, 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 territorial unit within the Ottoman Empire corresponding to historical *Eretz Yisraell/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.



Map 1 Ottoman Palestine 1888–1918.

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.