

Palestine 1936- A Peasant Army vs the British Empire 2

In 1923, the League of Nations formalized British rule under the Mandate for Palestine. Before the Mandate even began, the British faced a major crisis. On May 1st, 1921, two rival Jewish groups clashed in the streets of Jaffa.

An unauthorized May Day march by the Jewish Communist Party clashed with an authorized labor Zionist May Day parade, and the two sides went at each other with clubs and iron bars. As the brawl spilled into the Arab Jaffa, British police fired warning shots to restore order. The gunfire and the sight of armed Jews in the streets sparked panic.

Rumors raced through the city that Arabs were being killed, and what began as a clash between Jewish factions escalated into a full-scale intercommunal riot. The violence soon spread to the countryside as Arab groups attacked Zionist settlements. When it was over, 47 Jews and 48 Arabs were dead.

One month later, the Fourth Palestine Arab Congress proposed a democratic solution. An independent Palestinian government responsible to an elected assembly with a constitution guaranteeing civil rights for all—Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Jewish immigration would be halted, the Balfour Declaration rejected, and British rule would come to an end.

The British dismissed it outright. High Commissioner Herbert Samuel made clear that no constitutional path that contradicted Zionist objectives would ever be permitted. Lord Arthur Balfour, in a confidential memorandum in 1919, wrote, In the case of Palestine, we deliberately and rightly decline to accept the principle of self-determination.

We do not propose even to go through the form of consulting the wishes of the present inhabitants. Britain's response to the Palestinians' proposal, the Firearms Ordinance of 1922, a licensing system the British used to deny weapons to Palestinians while arming Jewish settlements. From the very beginning, Britain was preparing for total suppression.

In 1922, veterans of the infamous Black and Tans were recruited to form the Mandate's British Gendarmerie. Britain was redeploying its Irish counterinsurgency apparatus to Palestine. In 1923, Ze'ev Jabotinsky published The Iron Wall.

The Palestine newspaper published an Arabic translation confirming Palestinian worst fears about Zionist intentions. Back in 1919, the King Crane Commission had concluded that turning Palestine into a Jewish state would require serious trespass, on the rights of the non-Jewish majority. The commission reported that Zionist leaders anticipated near total dispossession, and that British officers privately admitted the project could only be implemented by force of arms, requiring tens of thousands of troops.

Washington, London, and Paris saw the findings, but the public didn't. The report was

suppressed. The 1920s saw increasing dispossession of the Palestinian Fellaheen, who made up more than 90% of the Palestinian population.

This was a ticking social time bomb waiting to explode, and it did in 1929. It started with a dispute over the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Some influential Zionists were openly calling for the rebuilding of the Temple.

In 1928, Menachem Ossishkin, the head of the Jewish National Fund, declared, Let us swear that the Jewish people will not rest and will not remain silent until its national home is built on our Mount Moriah. Mount Moriah is the Temple Mount, the site of the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, one of the holiest places in Islam. Rhetoric like this gave Muslim leaders good reason to fear that the Zionist project ultimately aimed to destroy the Muslim holy places to rebuild the Jewish Temple.

On August 15, 1929, revisionist Zionist youths from the Beitar Movement marched to the Western Wall through the Muslim Quarter. To the Arab residents and shopkeepers, the columns of uniformed militants marching through the narrow alleys looked like an invading army. When the Zionists planted their flag on the Western Wall of the Holy Haram al-Sharif, all hell broke loose.

Reports spread that Jewish demonstrators had attacked Arab residents, insulted the Prophet Muhammad, and were preparing to seize the Temple Mount and destroy Al-Aqsa Mosque. By the time the violence subsided, 133 Jews and 116 Arabs were dead, with hundreds more wounded. Haim Arlosoroff, a labor Zionist and political director of the Jewish Agency, argued that the 1929 violence was the result of unnecessary provocations by the revisionist movement, specifically citing the Beitar March.

The 1929 Shaw Commission report concurred with Arlosoroff's opinion about the immediate triggers, but it placed the blame on the Arabs for the scale of the violence that followed. As to the root causes, the Shaw Commission had this to say. The fundamental cause without which, in our opinion, disturbances either would not have occurred or would have been little more than a local riot is the Arab feeling of animosity and hostility towards the Jews consequent upon the disappointment of their political and national aspirations and fear for their economic future.

What the Shaw Commission acknowledged was that Palestinian resistance stemmed from fear of imminent displacement, not from innate antisemitism. Most of the Jews of Hebron who were massacred were not European colonists. They were Arab Jews.

For more than a thousand years, they lived as an integral part of Arab society. What changed was the arrival of Zionism, a political movement that weaponized Jewish identity to justify the subordination and dispossession of the Arab majority. Zionism destroyed the ancient social fabric of Palestine, transforming neighbors into enemies.

Even so, many Arabs did not abandon their neighbors. A Zionist executive investigation found

that 435 Jews were saved by Arabs. Over two-thirds of the community then found refuge in 28 Arab homes, some of which took in dozens of Jews.

Arabs were hurt defending their neighbors, one Jew testified afterward. For the Zionist movement, 1929 was a turning point, proof that the native population would never acquiesce to colonization. Leaders like Ben-Gurion embraced Jabotinsky's logic.

Jewish statehood would have to be imposed by force. In 1935, Palestinian dock workers discovered that a shipment labeled as cement bound for a Jewish merchant in Tel Aviv contained 25 machine guns, 800 rifles, and 400,000 rounds of ammunition. Despite this being the most grievous violation of the firearms law in mandate history, the British made no arrests.

The British were ignoring industrial-scale Zionist arms smuggling while carrying out destructive cordon and search operations in Arab villages. British troops dumped oil into flour, poured kerosene into grain stores, and smashed household furniture. Finding even a single bullet allowed for the arrest of the householder or the imposition of a collective fine on the village.

This sparked organized resistance. Izz ad-Din al-Qasim, a charismatic imam to the poor of Haifa and a Syrian veteran of the anti-French revolt, built a clandestine network of peasants and workers known as the Black Hand, which began launching attacks in the early 1930s. By 1935, it had grown to roughly 500 men organized into five-man cells across Palestine.

On November 20, 1935, British police cornered al-Qasim in a cave near Yabad. Surrounded, he told his men, let us die as martyrs. The headline in the newspaper, Palestine, read, 30,000 Accompany the Righteous Martyrs to Their Burial.

The eulogy continued. On that fatal day, he and his companions fought a heroic battle against the British troops that surrounded them near Yabad. They fought until their ammunition ran out.

Then the sheikh fell, reciting the Shahada with his last breath. The following morning, tens of thousands poured into Haifa from the surrounding villages to attend his funeral. The crowd clashed with the police while chanting down with the English, down with the colonialists.

Six months later, Sheikh Farhan al-Saadi, a member of al-Qasim's inner circle, ambushed a convoy near Tulkarm, executing two Jews, an act widely regarded as the opening shot of the Palestinian-Arab revolt. Ignoring the Jerusalem leadership, local national committees sprang up in every city, declaring strikes and demanding unified action. Under intense pressure, the Arab Higher Committee was formed with the Grand Mufti, Haj Amin al-Husseini, as president.

The committee issued a call for an indefinite strike until Britain met three demands. Palestinian independence, an end to Jewish immigration, and a ban on land transfers. The strike became one of the most successful examples of national mobilization in the 20th century.

The entire Arab workforce set down their tools. In October 1936, six months in, the strike was

suspended after Britain promised a royal commission. The result? The 1937 Peel Commission proposed partition and mass deportation of Arabs.

The proposed Jewish state, though only 20% of the territory, contained nearly 80% of Palestine's most productive agricultural land. A majority of the Jewish population were not Palestinian citizens. Once again, Britain was granting political supremacy to non-citizen residents over the citizen majority.

The Galilee, 95% Arab, would become part of the Jewish state with its approximately 225,000 Arabs deported. Only about 1,250 Jews would be transferred, while 300,000 Arabs would be expelled. The Hope-Simpson Report warned that the hill country assigned to the Arab state was overcrowded with thin, rocky soil incapable of supporting its existing population.

By Britain's own admission, these highlands lacked the land and resources to absorb hundreds of thousands expelled from the fertile plains, turning partition from a political proposal into a blueprint for economic and social collapse. The revisionist Zionists rejected the proposal outright. The 20th Zionist Congress rejected the borders as unacceptable.

The Woodhead Commission, established to examine the Peel Partition Plan, concluded that the plan was unworkable. On September 26, 1937, Palestinian militants assassinated Lewis Yelland Andrews, British District Commissioner for the Galilee. Within days, Britain suspended civil rights and vested the High Commissioner with near-absolute emergency powers.

Possession of a weapon could now result in the death penalty. On November 27, 1937, 80-year-old Sheikh Farhan al-Sadi was hanged by the British after being convicted under the Mandate's Firearms Law. Multiple accounts say the charge amounted to possession of a single bullet.

In an editorial published the next day, Falastin ran the headline, Sheikh Farhan al-Sadi, Martyr of the Homeland. The paper wrote, The British authorities, thinking to extinguish the flame by hanging its bearer, have only fanned it. The blood of martyrs is never lost.

It nourishes the Tree of Liberty, whose roots lie deep in the soil of Palestine. Outraged by the Sheikh's execution, thousands of fellaheen poured into the hills to join the rebellion. The center of gravity of resistance shifted from cities to the countryside as rural guerrilla bands launched a full-scale armed insurrection.

To survive the systematic counterinsurgency of a brutal colonial empire, the rebellion needed organization, discipline, and a leader with a mind as sharp as its spirit. It found its leader in Abd al-Rahim al-Hajj Muhammad, an Ottoman army veteran who forged village guerrilla bands into an army. He established military ranks in a strict code of honor, commanding his men to pay for every loaf of bread and forbidding executions without trials.

Abd al-Razik was the movement's enforcer, coordinating urban ambushes and destroying railway

lines and the Iraq petroleum pipeline. He operated a ruthless intelligence service to root out informers. Despite friction between the two leaders, they became the twin pillars of the resistance.

By the summer of 1938, the British had lost effective control over much of the hill country. A shadow government emerged. Al-Hajj Muhammad established rebel courts, postal networks, and systems of national taxation.

For a brief period, a de facto free Palestine existed in the Triangle of Jenin, Nablus, and Tulkom. But the ultimate blow to British prestige came in October. In a daring assault, rebels seized control of large parts of Jerusalem, briefly taking the old city itself.

To retake the city, British troops used the local Arab population as human shields. To crush the Palestinian revolt once and for all, they brought the full force of the empire to bear. Britain deployed two full divisions, nearly 25,000 regular troops, alongside heavy artillery and the Royal Air Force.

By the end of 1938, there was one British soldier for every 37 Palestinian Arabs. Villages were blown up. Whole sections of Arab Jaffa were leveled.

Villagers were herded into barbed wire cages for days without food or water. In the cages of Halhul, 13 people died of dehydration. When the Royal Ulster Rifles lost four of their own to a Palestinian landmine, they descended on the village of Al-Basa, along with the 11th Hussars.

They torched the village, rounded up 50 men, forced them onto a bus, then ordered the driver to run over a landmine. Survivors were cut down by machine-gun fire. The British sidelined Arab police and recruited some 3,000 Jews into a new supernumerary police force, integrating them directly into the bloody counterinsurgency apparatus.

In addition, the British recruited Zionist Haganah fighters into the special night squads, led by the British officer Ord Wingate, a fanatical Christian Zionist. In June 1938, the SNS, including Haganah member Amatzia Cohen, carried out a night raid on a defenseless village near the Lebanese border. Cohen later recalled the British sergeant who berated them back at base.

I think you are all totally ignorant, since you do not even know the elementary use of bayonets when attacking dirty Arabs. The special night squads quickly became the most brutal and lawless arm of Britain's counterinsurgency. By 1939, Wingate was becoming a problem for British officials.

He was caught passing British intelligence to Zionist leaders, openly lobbying Winston Churchill against the policy of his superiors, and exhibiting increasingly erratic and obsessional behavior. As the insurgency won down, British priorities shifted toward keeping the Arab world in the Allied fold, and Wingate became a political liability. The SNS had outlived its usefulness.

As a result, the special night squads were disbanded after a year and a half in operation, and Wingate was transferred to Britain. SNS veterans went on to form the Haganah's elite Palmak units. Commanders such as Moshi Dayan were direct protégés of Wingate.

The tactics Wingate taught became foundations of Israeli military doctrine. Night raids, collective punishment, reprisal attacks on civilians, human shields, and torture. In Israel, Wingate is remembered as a hero.

The Israeli National Sports Institute, the Wingate Institute, is named in his honor. As the tide turned against them, the resistance began to fracture. Some leaders fled.

Others cut deals with the British. The Nashashibi clan, early British collaborators, organized the Peace Bands, an anti-resistance militia. Al-Haj Muhammad refused to abandon his men and the villages that sustained them.

He was cornered in the village of San Iria. British forces, supported by aircraft, surrounded the village. Refusing to surrender, he was martyred in the ensuing battle.

His death is widely considered the effective end of the military revolt. By mid-1939, the revolt was crushed. There was no surrender, no ceasefire, no negotiated end.

It had been drowned in blood. More than 10% of the adult male Palestinian population had been killed, wounded, exiled, or incarcerated. Ironically, the British did reverse their policy on Zionism.

War with Nazi Germany was imminent, and a continued pro-Zionist policy risked pushing the entire Arab world into the arms of the Axis powers. The 1939 White Paper, issued in May, sharply restricted Jewish immigration and promised Palestinian independence within 10 years. For Palestinians, it was a Pyrrhic victory.

In 1919, Zionist leaders told the King Crane Commission that they anticipated a near-total dispossession of the non-Jewish population. Now thanks to Britain, nothing stood in their way. Thanks for watching.

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