

Palestine 1936- The Great Revolt and the Roots of the Middle East Conflict with Oren Kessler 2

Good afternoon, welcome to the Middle East Forum speaker webinar series and podcast. I'm Stacey Roman and I will be moderating this discussion today. We're pleased to have Oren Kessler, an author and Tel Aviv-based analyst join us to discuss his book, Palestine 1936, The Great Revolt and Roots of the Middle East Conflict.

Mr. Kessler will speak for 15 minutes and open it up for questions. Should you wish to ask a question, please use the Q&A box located at the bottom of your screen to type your question. And with that, I'll turn the discussion over to Mr. Oren Kessler.

Well, thank you very much. Thank you to the Middle East Forum for having me. It's great to be with you tonight.

Well, tonight out here in Tel Aviv anyway. I've got limited time, so I'm going to get right into it. I've been told I've got about 15, 20 minutes.

So that's, that makes us one of the shortest talks I've yet given on this book. So I've got a lot I want to tell you guys about. So let's, let's get started.

I just want to really cover a few key themes and key events of this book. Before I do, one very quick disclaimer, you can see the book cover behind me. If my publisher had given me a little more room over there, the title may have been Palestine 1936 to 39, because this is a book whose core is really about three years of very, a very crucial period in the history of Palestine and the land of Israel, a very crucial period in the Arab, what became, would become known as the Arab-Israeli conflict, and a very crucial period just in world history.

This is, of course, the cusp of the Second World War. So I just want you to bear that in mind as I go forward, that this is the period we're talking about, 36 to 39. Now, this is the very first general interest book in English on this period and on this chapter in the history of this land, namely the Arab revolt, and everything that emanated from it.

This is a story that has three sides, Arab, Jewish, and British. Of course, this is British mandate Palestine, and the British are administering the country. Now, this revolt was Arab, of course, but I believe and I argue that this is as much a Jewish story and a Zionist story as an Arab story.

There were 500 Jews killed in this revolt. These are really massive numbers. These are numbers we wouldn't see until the Second Intifada.

But even beyond that, I argue that the Jewish Counter Revolt is a kind of forgotten, extremely formative chapter in the story of how most of mandate Palestine became the state of Israel. I want to focus here on just three legacies with an emphasis on the Jewish side in this talk. Some

of these may surprise you because these are very fundamental, formative developments in this part of the world and in this conflict.

These three legacies are Jewish state, the first time that a Jewish state appears on the international agenda, not just the Jewish national home as pledged in the Balfour Declaration, but a Jewish state with everything that means. The second is a Jewish army. Of course, I will get into all of these momentarily, but the second is a Jewish army.

This is the period in which, through British training and facilitation and arms, the Jews of Palestine, of the land of Israel, the Yishuv, as we say in Hebrew, the pre-state community, becomes a military force to be reckoned with for the very first time. Then the third legacy is that right on the eve of the Holocaust, this is the event that causes Britain to close the gates of what is really the only major sanctuary left in the world to the persecuted Jews of Europe and thereby dooms untold numbers of them to their deaths in Europe. Now, if I had more time, I would get into a bit more of the backstory and a bit more of the historical table setting.

Pre-1936, we could talk about the initial waves of Zionist immigration in the late 19th century. We could talk about the Balfour Declaration in 1917, but I think probably many of your viewers or many of you out there watching me right now probably have a pretty good handle on all of that already. I will say that I've lost track of how many times when I start talking about this book, people say, oh, you mean Hebron, you mean the Hebron Massacre.

And the short answer is no, that was in 1929. The core of my book begins seven years after that. The Hebron Massacre was a very grim and gruesome series of attacks, mostly over a day or two in Hebron and a few other places in which 133 Jews were killed in many of them in very gruesome circumstances.

But I believe and I argue in the book that that's what they were. These were riots, this was terrorism, this was not a concerted nationalist uprising. And you can probably guess that the first time in my view that you see anything like that is 1936.

This is really the first intifada in the parlance of our time. Now, there's a man whose name will probably ring familiar to many of you. It's Izz al-Din al-Qassam.

He is a preacher originally from Syria. He's a jihadi preacher. And in the early 1920s, he comes down to Palestine, to Haifa, and he's preaching jihad in the Istiklal Mosque of Haifa.

It's still an active mosque, you can still go visit today, but he's preaching jihad to the urban Muslim poor of Haifa. And in 1930, in the mid-1930s, his followers start waging some sporadic attacks against Jewish targets, against British targets, and they kill a Jewish member of the Palestine police. And now al-Qassam is a wanted man, and long story short, a manhunt ensues, and he is killed in the forest of what is now the Northern West Bank.

And he basically becomes the first sort of martyr icon in the Palestinian Arab pantheon. And David Ben-Gurion, who even at this time is the sort of undisputed leader of the Jews of Palestine, Ben-Gurion recognizes the importance and the significance of this moment immediately. And I've read his diaries at length, and he writes, finally, the Arabs have found someone who's willing to die for an ideal.

And he predicts there will be dozens, hundreds, or thousands just like him. Fast forward a few months to spring 1936, and a few of Qassam's acolytes ambush a Jewish car, again, in the Northern West Bank near Nablus-Tulkarem area. It rather sounds like something that could have been ripped from the headlines today.

And they kill two Jews on the roads. And these are typically viewed as the opening shots of the Arab revolt. And this initial violence is very soon matched by political demands.

I'm going to state another name that will be known to many of you. It's Haj Amin al-Husseini. He was the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and the head of the Supreme Muslim Council.

And he is really the unquestioned leader of Palestine's Arabs and the spiritual leader of its Muslims. And Haj Amin kind of rushes to lay claim to this revolt, to assert his control over this revolt that began fairly spontaneously. And he makes three demands.

He says, basically, that a general strike is called in the Arab community, initially in Nablus, and then spreads elsewhere. And basically, Arab leaders say that they will have no contact with the British economy or with the Jewish economy until three demands are met. And these demands are made very clear by Haj Amin.

Number one, a complete stoppage on Jewish immigration to the country. Number two, complete ban on land sales, because very many wealthy, land-owning Arabs were selling land at highly inflated prices to the Jews, even as they rail against the practice in public. And then the third demand was the creation of a legislative assembly that would reflect the demographics of the country, which are still about two-thirds Arab.

I should make clear here that in this period of the first half of the 1930s, the Jewish population of this land doubles. This is due to the rise of Hitler in January 1933. This is due to the rise of various anti-Semitic movements across Europe, in places like Poland, Hungary, Romania.

And so between 1931 and 1935, the Jewish population of this land doubles, and it's nearly 30% of the country. And it's very clear to Arabs, not just the educated intelligentsia, but it's very clear even to simple subsistence farmers in this land that if things continue this way, the Jews will be a majority before long. So Haj Amin makes these three demands, and the strike begins, and it lasts six months.

And this is really a source of tremendous pride to the Arabs of Palestine. Even today, this is one

of the longest general strikes anywhere in history. And even more important, it bears fruit, because the British send the famous Peel Commission to this country, to this land, the Royal Commission to examine grievances.

And this leads us to our first legacy of this, first major legacy of this revolt, because the Peel Commission puts together a 400-page report, which if anyone has the entire month of June free, I strongly recommend they read, because it's a very good read. It's certainly the most readable of any of the many, many reports that the British compiled while they were here. But it's known to history mainly for the last 10 or 12 pages of it, in which this commission recommends partition.

It recommends the first two-state solution, as it were, between the river and the sea, one including a Jewish state. And this is the first time that a Jewish state, as I mentioned, appears on the international agenda in any real way. This is the first two-state solution appearing on the international agenda in any real way.

And it's the ideological template for every subsequent partition plan, from the UN's exactly 10 years later in 1947 to the various iterations we've known much closer to our time. And Ben-Gurion plays coy, and he sort of doesn't give a direct answer about how he feels about this partition plan. But privately, he is euphoric.

Again, I've read his diary from the time. So is Chaim Weizmann, who's the head of the World Zionist Organization in this period. They both are thrilled by this prospect of a Jewish state, no matter how small.

But the Mufti predictably rejects this proposal. He calls it an amputation and a degradation and a humiliation. And the commission goes back to London.

Now, there's another very fascinating man. And I should say, I really wanted this book to be a book about people. And perhaps that sounds a bit like a bit of a cliché, but I really wanted to reveal great momentous historical events through individual, through human beings on all three sides.

And I was really thrilled to find that this period is just full of really complex compelling characters on all three sides. And one of these characters, who I spend a bit of time with in the book, is a man named Louis Andrews. He's the acting governor of Galilee.

He's an Australian, and he is a Christian Zionist. And he's actually a very good Arabic speaker, incredibly good Arabic speaker by all accounts. He's also one of the very few British administrators who learns Hebrew to any degree.

So this Mr. Andrews, who also was a great proponent of partition, was assassinated on his 41st birthday while attending church in Nazareth. And I have a special sympathy for the poor, late Mr. Andrews, because I just turned 41 last month. So Louis Andrews is assassinated, and this is by

far the highest ranking British official to have been assassinated during this revolt or indeed throughout the entire mandate.

And now the revolt is back on. It had been kind of suspended while the Royal Commission was there. Now it's back on.

It's raging more fiercely than ever. And the Mufti is a wanted man, because it is clear to everyone, or almost everyone, Jew, Arab, and Briton alike, that it is the Mufti who's essentially pulling the strings of this revolt. That doesn't mean that he was sending every last attacker and telling them where to go, but he was pulling the strings and guiding the revolt along its main path in terms of incitement and even making sure that it had supplies and arms.

And so the Mufti flees famously dressed as a Bedouin. Some people think he was dressed as a woman, but I happen to believe he was dressed as a Bedouin. He flees to Jaffa Port and from there to Beirut, and he won't be back in Palestine for another four decades.

So the revolt is raging, but the British have a problem. The war clouds are looming over Europe, and it seems to be a question of when and not if war with Hitler will break out. And they simply don't have the manpower to quell the Arab revolt.

So what do they do? They accede to a longstanding Jewish demand to arm and train Jews in large numbers. And this gets us to our second major legacy of this revolt. In this period, about 15,000 or 20,000 Jews become members of what's called the Jewish Supernumerary Police, Notrim, they say in Hebrew, or gaffers, they were also known as.

It's an Arabic word. And these 15,000 to 20,000 Jews receive their training and their arms and oftentimes their salary from the British, but it's clear to all that they're ultimately responsible and answerable to the Haganah, the mainstream Jewish armed force of this time. And this is really the period in which the Haganah goes from a glorified network of night watchmen to the seed of a Jewish army.

And again, all with the facilitation, the active facilitation, participation of the preeminent military power of the day, namely the British Empire. And so, as I mentioned, the British have a problem. They are unable to quell this revolt.

This is really the peak of the revolt, mid-1938. Rebels, Arab rebels, even occupy many of the main cities of Palestine in this period. And it's only when the Munich crisis is finally averted, when the Neville Chamberlain government grants Hitler his wishes for the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia and Britain kind of breathes a sigh of relief and war is averted, at least temporarily, it's only then that Britain can send large-scale military forces here.

And that's what they do. They send two full divisions. This is a huge number of soldiers.

This is the largest British military deployment between the wars. And they begin to engage in

some very heavy-handed, some would even say brutal counter-insurgency. And there are a number of fairly well-documented incidents in this period that can only be described as atrocities.

And there are measures taken. Home demolitions are used in wide numbers in this period. There is a security barrier constructed on the border with Lebanon.

There's a clear parallel there with the West Bank security barrier of today. Checkpoints, curfews, administrative detention, so namely detention without specific charges, many of the most controversial methods that the IDF uses today have their roots, both in terms of the methods themselves and even the legal basis thereof in this period. So I see that my time is starting to ebb away.

So I will try to close this up fairly quickly. But I should also mention that in addition to this very heavy-handed British counter-insurgency, Arab infighting also had a tremendous effect in finally bringing this revolt to, putting it on the ropes and finally wrestling it to the ground. And much of this infighting was directed by Haji Amin in his Beirut exile, but not all of it by any means.

And there was the initial unity of the Arab community behind Haji Amin really devolved and dissolved in the second half of this revolt. And there was just a convulsion of score-settling between rival families and between those who deemed themselves true patriots and those who were considered collaborators, real or perceived. And so really the revolt is finally brought, is finally on the ropes in late 1938, early 1939.

But as a kind of denouement here, the British with their insatiable appetite for conferences and committees and commissions, they invite the British and the Jews to London for something that's called the St. James Conference. This is the era of appeasement, right? This is essentially government policy at this time is appeasement, and not just vis-a-vis fascist Europe, but even, and I've read the cabinet papers, they talk quite openly about appeasing Arab and Muslim opinion ahead of what they expected to be a world war. They were particularly worried about Muslim opinion in India, and they were worried if the large Muslim population in India was not on side during the war, that that would cause some major problems for Britain.

So they basically determine, they call this conference, but the result thereof is basically a foregone conclusion. And the result of this conference is the infamous white paper of 1939. And so if in 1935, 60,000 Jews came to this land, the white paper determined that over the next five years, only 75,000 Jews in total could come to this land, and then no more Jews could immigrate without Arab consent.

Now, this is already mid 1939. So this is, of course, a crucial, critical period for the Jews of Europe. And this is really seen by the Jews as a tremendous betrayal.

It is seen as a reneging on that Peel partition plan I mentioned earlier, but even more so, it's basically rolling back the entire Balfour Declaration project. And I think I'll just close with a couple

of thoughts, which this is one of the great what ifs of history. What if the British had not passed this famous or infamous white paper in 1939? What if there had been a two state solution in 1937, even with a minuscule Jewish state? We can only wonder how many of the persecuted Jews of Europe could have found sanctuary in this land.

But one just final thought that I want to leave you with is that Ben-Gurion was really an expert in turning adversity to advantage. And despite the tremendous toll in blood that this revolt inflicted on the Jews, they made massive military gains, which I already mentioned, massive economic gains. This is the period in which Tel Aviv port opens, for example, because the Arab port in Jaffa had been closed.

So tremendous economic, industrial, agricultural gains, demographic gains, even settlements. There's not a single Jewish settlement that's abandoned during this revolt, but several dozen spring up around the country. So really the Jews have formed the kernel of their state to be in 1939.

As the revolt is brought to an end and the world war begins, the Jews have that kernel and springboard of a state. And on the Arab side, it's really the mirror image. The revolt to crush Zionism has really crushed the Arabs themselves.

There are at least 5,000, perhaps even 8,000 Arabs killed, huge numbers of homes destroyed, tens of thousands of Arabs have fled the country. The leadership is in exile. There's a huge amount of bad blood within the Arab community.

Weapons have been confiscated, huge numbers of men in jail. So the entire social fabric is just torn. And so what I argue in the book is that the final showdown between Jews and Arabs, that at least the civil war aspect of the 1948 war was really won by one side and lost by the other, really nearly 10 years in advance.

So I think I'll stop there before I'm told that I've run far too long. I hope I've given you guys some food for thought and I'm happy to take your questions. Absolutely.

Thank you so much. We have quite a few great questions coming in. Daniel Pipes asks, thank you for your excellent presentation.

Can you please tell us about the role of Muslim immigration to Palestine in the events of the 1930s? Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. So it's hard to find precise numbers on Arab or Muslim immigration into Palestine during the mandate, but it was certainly a phenomenon.

There are extremely precise numbers on Jewish immigration because the Jewish authorities kept those numbers and of course the British authorities did as well. For Arab immigration, it's much more difficult to get a precise number. We know that there was, at the very least, there were seasonal migrants, particularly there were Arabs from the Horan region of Syria, for example,

who would come in as seasonal workers.

A certain number of them presumably did not leave. So it was a phenomenon of Arab immigration. There were opportunities created here by the Zionist enterprise that simply didn't exist anywhere else in the Middle East, and that was a magnet for economic migrants from around the region.

But again, I haven't come across clear numbers. I've only come across sort of very, very wide estimates, but it was a phenomenon indeed. Thank you so much.

Steve Gersoff, MD asks, why did the British pick Haj Amin Hassani to be the Mufti when there were already four other Muftis? And Randy Sable follows up, what were they thinking? It's an excellent question. I'm glad that you're asking me this. There's actually something I found, which didn't make it into the book because I had already sent the manuscripts in, but some of the most fascinating documents that I found in my research were the secret testimonies from the Peel Commission from 1937.

These were meant to be destroyed and burned. These were not meant to see the light of day, but the British put them in the archives and kept them classified for 80 years. They were very quietly declassified in 2017.

And one of these secret testimonies is by Herbert Samuel, who was the first High Commissioner for Palestine and, of course, a Jew and a Zionist. And he made one of the most fateful decisions in the entire history of the Jewish-Arab conflict, which was to name Amin al-Husseini as Grand Mufti and head of the Supreme Muslim Council. And he's asked in this session why he did it.

And he kind of he wages a certain defense, not a very spirited defense, but he basically says that, well, you know, we had already given the Nashashibis and other rival families to the Husseini's various other positions. So it had to be a Husseini in that position. And only Amin had the requisite religious training, having studied in Cairo at al-Azhar.

And he had been basically well-behaved until then, which, of course, is not true. If you've read anything about the 1920 riots, but I'm digressing here. But it's really fascinating.

I wrote about it. I mentioned it briefly in an interview that I did for Fathom magazine, if anyone wants to look that up. But I'll just say that for what it's worth, Herbert Samuel's son, who spent his entire life in this land, confirmed or he said that he thought it was one of his father's greatest mistakes while he was here.

And it's hard to disagree. I've forgotten the second question. It was the second question.

What was he thinking? I don't have an answer to that. Yes. And also, sorry, I didn't get through the whole question when I asked that.

Did Samuel ever apologize for his choice of Husseini? Not that I've found. In fact, when he's asked about this in these Peale secret sessions, this is the only instance I've ever found in which he's asked about it. He doesn't it in his memoirs at all.

So it's really fascinating. It only takes up maybe a half or a quarter of a page in this testimony. But yeah, he has a somewhat reluctant, half-hearted defense of his behavior.

I get the sense that he recognized that it was a huge mistake. But yeah, it's another huge what if. What if someone else had been Grand Mufti? Everything in this land could have been different.

There may have been a two-state solution in 1937. There may not have been the tremendous Palestinian refugee crisis in 1948 if the Palestinian Arabs had been under different leadership in the period leading up to that. So it's a huge what if, absolutely.

Thank you. And speaking of the Peale Commission, Richard Galbar asked, I believe that during the Peale Commission, many Arab witnesses denied the fact of the existence of an Arab Palestine, saying that the mandate of Palestine area was actually part of South Syria. Have you seen much evidence of this? And Sandro Ballestrino follows up, had the Grand Mufti accepted the Peale Commission partition, do you think Ben-Gurion would have accepted as well? I'll answer the second one first.

Ben-Gurion did basically, Ben-Gurion and Weizmann essentially there was raucous debate in Zionist circles about whether to accept it or not. And there were the right-wing dissident revisionist movement of Ze'ev Jabotinsky rejected partition out of hand. But there were also some fairly prominent, some very prominent left-wing Zionists, Yitzhak Tabenkin, notably, and some others, Yossi Shekin, I believe, who opposed partition.

They thought it was a betrayal. They thought the Jewish state was far too small. It didn't have enough room to absorb immigrants, indefensible, et cetera, et cetera.

But the two people who mattered most were Ben-Gurion and Weizmann. And although they didn't think that territorially it was the last word, they accepted in principle the idea of partition as a basis for moving forward. And that's the response that they gave to the British.

In terms of Palestine as its own unit or part of Syria, in this period, it's not entirely clear even among people like Haj Amin what the final goal is, for example, namely whether an independent Palestine full stop or an independent, an Arab Palestine as part of a wider confederation. And I think it was I believe it was when the Mufti rejected, he even rejected the white paper. This is often forgotten.

It wasn't just the Peel Commission partition plan that he rejected, but even the white paper, which went so far towards Arab demands, the Mufti rejected it. And he went against almost all advice among other Arab leaders within Palestine, other prominent Arabs, and he rejected the white

paper for not going far enough. And I believe it was at that point in his rejection statement that he said Palestine will remain forever Arab as part of an Arab confederation.

So even in the late 1930s, he's still talking about some kind of Arab confederation. So I think the final goal was not entirely clear on the Arab side. Thank you so much.

And we're quickly running out of time, but if you wouldn't mind answering a few more questions. Lawrence Jaffe asks, or states, fascinating talk. Thank you.

What effect did the revolt have on the admittedly small attempts at Jewish Arab local dialogue, e.g. the Ehud Brit Shalom and Palestinian Communist Party? So even beyond those, those were those two, the Brit Shalom was a quite small movement on the Jewish side, but it kind of it punched above its weight because it had a few very prominent members, people like Judah Magnus, the head of Hebrew University and Martin Buber. But even beyond even beyond those fairly small groups, there were there were real attempts during this period, which I read about in the book. There was, for example, there were there were frequent meetings between Ben-Gurion and a man named Moussa Alami, who was one of my main, not mine, but one of the main Arab characters who I really follow in this book.

And they meet again and again in the mid 30s to try to reach some kind of modus vivendi. Ben-Gurion also meets with George Antonius, who was certainly was certainly considered no slouch in terms of Arab nationalism. He wrote the seminal text of the period on Arab nationalism, the Arab awakening.

And so he met there were there were attempts. There were attempts even by very mainstream figures in this period to reach some kind of understanding. But I think but I argue in the book that this period of the revolt was really formative in a negative way as well, in that it really led to a certain self-segregation between both communities.

And the contact between both communities, between the two communities, was really very much diminished as the revolt began to to rage. There were there were stigmas on both sides against against too much contact with the opposite side. And on the Arab side, of course, Haj Amin was very much enforcing his will, even from exile.

And if anyone considered just trying to step out of line, quote unquote, and reach some kind of understanding with with the Jews, they would typically find themselves either dead or in some other very serious trouble. So I think, yeah, so that was that's one of the more negative consequences of this is of this revolt is this kind of self-separation, self-segregation between the two sides. Thank you.

And RDESQ asks or states, you didn't mention the Christian Arab role, if any, in the actual result, as opposed to George Antonius. Could you please comment? Very good question. It.

There, I found, I think, broadly speaking. Many Christian Arabs supported the with the political demands of the revolt. I didn't find hardly any or even any at all evidence of Christian militants.

I don't think I came across any Christian militants at all. But, you know, there's I think there are many Christians also felt themselves between a rock and a hard place. There is there is a there's a man named Yusuf Hanna, who was the editor of Philistine Philistine newspaper in Jaffa.

He was a Christian and he had a long correspondence with The New York Times correspondent here, a man by the name of Joseph Levy, who was a Jew and an Arabic speaker and an anti-Zionist. And they and I and their correspondences in the Israeli archives. And it's really fascinating.

And at a certain point, this Yusuf Hanna writes, there's not you know, there's not an Arab worth his salt in this country who wants to be ruled by Jews. But there's also not an Arab with any self-respect in this country who wants to be ruled by terrorists. And I think that encapsulates the bind that a lot of Christian Arabs were in, namely, for the most part, they were not ardent Zionists, but they were also quite fearful of what an Arab Palestine would look like if it were run by someone like the Mufti.

So so I think there was a certain amount of public opinion on the Christian side that probably would have been OK with the British staying indefinitely. But but on the whole, on the whole, I think many of them were caught in this in this bind. Thank you.

As many of our viewers have stated in their questions, fascinating talk. Can you tell our viewers where we can find your book? Absolutely. It's on Amazon.

It's on Barnes and Noble. It's for those of you not in the US, Blackwell's UK has free international shipping to Israel, to the UK or wherever you may be. You can order from directly from my publisher, Roman and Middlefield.

There are many, many, many options. So it's available in hardcover and ebook. Wonderful.

Thank you so much. We've come to the close of our webinar. Thank you again, Mr. Kessler, for joining us today.

Thank you so much. For our viewers, please be on the lookout for our weekly webinar offerings email coming out over the weekend. Thank you all for joining us, and I hope you have a great day.

Thanks.