

## THE POSITION IN PALESTINE

By I. Rennap

Palestine is fast becoming Britain's armed base in the Eastern Mediterranean. Large quantities of munitions and troops have been sent to Haifa; the frontier with Syria is strongly fortified.

Before 1914 Palestine, as Syria's southern province, was a backward semi-feudal country. The Arab population of 500,000 consisted mainly of poor peasants. Industrial development was extremely limited, except for soap making and quarrying. There was an upper class of wealthy landowning families.

The Jews numbered about 60,000, including the early Zionist settlers in agricultural settlements, citrus growers employing Jewish labourers. In the towns the Jews were mainly of the elderly, highly religious type who came to Palestine to spend their last days in prayer and devotion. Relations between Jews and Arabs were friendly.

When the last war began Britain had two strategic aims in the Middle East: first, to deal Turkey a knock-out blow; second to organise the Arab territories on a basis which would secure British lines of communication in the Eastern Mediterranean.

To achieve the first objective, negotiations were opened with Sherif Hussein, of Mecca, on behalf of the Arab nationalists. Britain promised that if the Arabs rebelled against their Turkish overlords, Britain would support the establishment of an independent Arab State. But the area which would comprise the sphere of Arab independence was left vague and undefined, and the Arabs took it for granted that Palestine would come into this sphere.

Britain, however, had other aims. After getting Arab support. Britain in 1917 gave a pledge to the Zionist leaders that in the event of an Allied victory, Palestine would be a Jewish National Home.

The pledge—the Balfour Declaration—was given to gain the support of world Jewry. Britain took upon herself the solemn task of restoring the Jews to their ancient homeland, and thus gained the Mandate over Palestine.

Behind this pious humbug the Balfour Declaration became an instrument of British rule in Palestine. When the Palestine Arabs demanded their national independence they were told that Palestine was meant to be excluded from the sphere of Arab “independence” and that anyway Britain had “obligations” to the Jews. And when the Zionist leaders demanded fulfilment of Britain’s promises they were told Britain had “obligations” to the Arabs and that actually they were promised a Jewish national home in Palestine but not Palestine as a Jewish national home.

Britain’s aim was to dominate Palestine. The position of the country was of vital strategic importance to Britain in the Middle East as a naval, air and military base. Haifa is today an important harbour for the British Fleet, and is also the western terminus of the pipe line which carries oil from the Mosul oilfields to the Fleet.

The method adopted by Britain was the familiar one of “divide and rule.” Britain used the sincere, but mistaken, aspirations of a section of Jewry (who believe in Palestine as a solution of the Jewish question) for a buffer and counterweight against the Arab movement, while at the same time creating a community, to defend Britain’s interests in Palestine.

The Jewish settlers came with the most sincere and honest intentions; the Zionist leaders consciously allowed their aspirations to be used as a weapon against the Arabs.

Because of the immaturity of the anti-imperialist movement in Palestine, the Arab tended to link up the innocent Jewish settler with British imperialist rule, and the reactionary aims of the Zionist leaders; to him it appeared that it was the Jewish immigrant who was responsible for his destitution. So the anti-imperialist revolts from 1920 till 1930 took the form of fierce massacre of the Jews. The two peoples were set at each others’ throats, with Britain playing the part of “impartial arbiter,” “keeping the peace” in Palestine between the two communities.

Since 1930, the political level of the movement became higher. In 1933, there were big demonstrations against increased Jewish immigration, but they were also definitely against the British Government. In the towns, the demonstrators avoided marching through the Jewish quarters.

The uprising in 1936 marked a higher stage of development. The six Arab parties united into the Arab Higher Committee which led the political general strike in support of a full-blooded programme for national independence. But, with the Fascist penetration into the Middle East, the movement, although basically progressive, was diverted and sidetracked because its leadership in the Arab Higher Committee became the agents of the Axis that was seeking to use the Arab movement to further its imperialist aims in the Middle East. British imperialism tried to “appease” these leaders, the Grand Mufti and his group, by tearing up the Balfour Declaration, drastically restricting Jewish immigration and land purchases, and confining the Jews to a perpetual minority in Palestine—but with little success.

The revolt had been crushed by the outbreak of war. Nevertheless, nearly 30,000 persons were flung into concentration camps and prisons for anti-imperialist activity. The most repressive measures have been used against Jews and Arabs known to be anti-imperialists. The Zionist leaders are busy recruiting Jews for armed service; while the pro-British Arab notables are equally busy recruiting Arabs for the same purpose.