

PALESTINE AND THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT: 1948–1970

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With the declaration of Israeli independence on May 14, 1948, the nature of the Arab-Israeli conflict and Britain's role in it entered a new phase. Before Israel's creation, the conflict was one between Zionism and the Palestinian Arabs that originated prior to World War I as a result of Jewish immigration into Palestine with the goal of ultimately creating a Jewish state. This objective had gained official recognition with the issuance of the Balfour Declaration by Great Britain on November 2, 1917. It promised British support to create "in Palestine a national home for the Jewish people," understood by British and Zionist officials to mean a Jewish state in all of Palestine. Once the Balfour Declaration was incorporated into the 1922 British mandate for Palestine, Britain was obligated to prepare an incoming Jewish population for self-government, not the existing Arab population; mandates had been instituted with the idea of preparing local inhabitants for future independence.

As the mandatory power responsible for Palestine, Britain had faced an Arab revolt in the 1930s which it had crushed, and then a Jewish revolt from 1945 onward demanding a Jewish state. Faced with world knowledge of the Holocaust and American pressure favouring Zionism, Britain decided to abdicate its responsibility and in February 1947 handed the Palestine question over to the newly formed United Nations, though British forces remained in Palestine to May 1948. The U.N. General Assembly approved recommendations for partition of Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state in November 1947, leading to intense civil strife between Jews and mostly Palestinian Arabs that resulted in the creation of Israel. This conflict, and attacks by Arab armies immediately following Israel's independence declaration, resulted in the flight or forcible expulsion by Israel of over 700,000 Palestinians.

Israel's victory in the first Arab-Israeli war inaugurated the new phase of the Arab-Israeli conflict as one of states in which the Palestinians played at times important but secondary roles throughout the period 1948–1970. Another consequence was Britain's relegation to a new status of involved observer. Britain had abstained in the U.N. partition vote of November 1947 though it had backed the division of Palestine between Israel and Transjordan, arousing suspicion of collusion to deny creation of a Palestinian entity; Transjordan was renamed the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in 1948. Jordan absorbed the West Bank and its population of 400,000 Palestinians and admitted half a million Palestinian refugees from Israel. As a result, King Abdullah's Jordan found itself with a

majority population of Palestinians to whom he gave citizenship, the only Arab state to do so for those refugees they accepted.

The PRO files for the period 1948–1970 can be divided into three periods for purposes of analysis: 1948–1957; 1957–1967; and 1968–1970. The first period, covered extensively in this collection, ends with the aftermath of the Suez crisis where Israel, France and Britain collaborated in attacking Egypt. The Suez venture humiliated Britain and seriously affected its ability to intervene in Middle Eastern affairs generally, forcing it into a more pronounced secondary role allied with the United States. The second period, marked by intense intra-Arab strife between conservative monarchies and regimes led by leaders calling for pan-Arab unity, also saw increasing tensions within the Arab nationalist camp, notably between Egypt and Syria, that played a major role in instigating the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. With Israel's occupation of the Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights, and the West Bank as the result of the 1967 conflict, the Arab-Israeli conflict entered a new phase, focusing on the possible exchange of occupied lands for peace, that lasts to this day. The files available for 1968–1970 consider 1970 only, focusing on Jordan. There, increasing tensions involving rival Palestinian factions ultimately led to civil war in August-September 1970 and Jordan's crushing of the Palestinian resistance. The stress of negotiations that achieved a cease-fire at the end of September caused the collapse and death of Gamal Abd al-Nasser who had ruled Egypt since 1954 and symbolized the Arab nationalist cause to much of the Arab world.

I. 1948–1957

The Arab-Israeli conflict evolved within two frameworks, the regional one within the Middle East and the global environment characterized by the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the Communist bloc on the one hand and the Western powers, notably the United States, Britain, and France, on the other. These files focus more on the region, though some (FO 371 files for 1950-51) consider the likelihood of a Middle East Command, to serve as a bulwark against communist influence, that might include Israel.

Britain's role in the region during this period was defined by her ongoing imperial obligations. She was deeply committed to Jordan, whose creation she had authored at the end of World War I, and likewise to Iraq for which she had had a mandate following that conflict. Palestinian and Jordanian issues are covered extensively in these files, especially because of ongoing Israeli-Jordanian tensions. Initially these arose over definitions of frontiers and fears that Israeli pressure might destabilize King Abdullah's regime whose Arab Legion was commanded by Sir John Glubb, a British subject. Abdullah's plight was accentuated by strong, and well-founded, suspicion among other Arab rulers and many Palestinians that, with British approval, he had conspired with Israel to divide Palestine. Files FO 816/172, PREM 11/392 and FO 371/90287, 91431, 19789, 91796-98, 91838-39, and 96986

and 96996-97 cover Abdullah's assassination in Jerusalem by a Palestinian and its regional repercussions, including news of the deposition of Egypt's King Farouq and likely replacement by a military group led by the young colonel Gamal Abd al-Nasser.

British-Egyptian relations during this period became increasingly unstable. Officially Egypt was independent. However, Britain retained control of a two-hundred square mile area in the Suez Canal Zone as a military installation, stemming from its occupation of Egypt in 1882 and almost total control of Egyptian affairs from that point to the Anglo-Egyptian treaty of 1936. Egyptian nationalists, whether secular or of the Muslim Brotherhood, demanded Egypt's full withdrawal from the Suez Canal Zone. Egypt's Nasser would gain British agreement in 1954 for a full British withdrawal from the canal zone by June 1956 just prior to Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal that created the pretext for British-French-Israeli collusion. The particulars of the build-up to the Suez crisis are outside the purview of files dedicated to the Arab-Israeli conflict, but one sees in FO 371 files 96996-98, 97033, 121732-33, 121745-46, 121748-54, 121781 and 121783 and WO 322/2 discussion of immediate events and disputes such as the Egyptian blockade of ships destined for Israel, and efforts to resolve the matter at the United Nations.

The major coverage in these files is of border tensions between Israel and its immediate Arab neighbours, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. Those with [Syria](#) involved disputes over demilitarized zones in the Lake Tiberias (Sea of Galilee) and Lake Huleh areas below the Golan Heights which Israel occupied contrary to UN truce arrangements in order to control supplies of water that originated in the Golan area.. The United Nations was deeply involved in efforts to resolve such disputes, though [Israel](#) frequently rejected UN offers of mediation as infringing on its sovereignty.

The most intense clashes during the early 1950s occurred along the Israeli-Jordanian frontier. There were frequent infiltrations by displaced Palestinians now residing in the West Bank. Most aimed at stealing crops or property but some resulted in Israeli casualties. Israel's standard response was massive military retaliation, holding the Jordanian government responsible. Extensive treatment of these tensions and diplomatic exchanges relating to them, including the retaliatory raid on the Jordanian village of Qibya in 1953, led by Colonel Ariel Sharon, that resulted in many deaths can be found in FO 371 Files 104755-57 and 104777-91. Analysis of related events for 1954 exists in FO 371 Files and 111098-99 and 111101-07.

In the midst of such strife, Britain, France and the United States sought to monitor and control arms shipments to all sides to prevent further conflict, while also striving at times to propose peace talks based on Anglo-American initiatives. FO 371 files have much to say about arms supplies and sources of weapons. A major initiative during 1955-1956 was Project Alpha, a joint U.S.-British effort to gain

a comprehensive peace that would include treaties between Israel and its Arab neighbours, starting with Egypt, and resolution of the Palestinian refugee problem. Further FO 371 files have extensive coverage of these efforts and the Israeli and Arab responses to them, which went beyond diplomatic exchanges to include further outbreaks of strife on all of Israel's frontiers.

In the midst of these efforts, Israel undertook a major attack on Egyptian posts in Gaza in February 1955, in part a reflection of Israeli domestic political instability. This raid led ultimately to Egypt's turn to the Soviet bloc for weapons, an Egyptian blockade of Israeli shipping between the Gulf of Aqaba and the Red Sea, intensified Israeli-Arab border strife, especially on the Egyptian frontier, covered extensively in FO 371/115829-49, 115898-911, and 115918 and FO 141/1395 and 1399, and contributed to the Suez crisis noted above.

II. 1957–1967

The Egyptian-Israeli front was stable for nearly all of the decade from the Suez Crisis to the spring of 1967. This was in part due to the presence of U.N. Emergency Forces (UNEF) stationed at strategic locations in the Sinai Peninsula, including at Sharm al-Shaykh, a promontory that overlooks the Strait of Tiran, the passage connecting the Red Sea and Gulf of Aqaba. The Egyptian blockade of Israeli shipping through the Tiran Strait had been a major Israeli grievance, and Israel warned in 1957 that any future Egyptian blockade would be considered a *casus belli*, or legitimate cause for war. Nasser would blockade the Tiran Straits at the end of May 1967, though the timing of Israel's attack did not reflect that declaration; instead it reflected knowledge that Egypt was sending emissaries to Washington to seek to negotiate a way out of the crisis.

Many files for this period consider [British-Egyptian ties after Suez](#) when diplomatic relations had been severed; PREM 13/414 contains material on British-Israeli talks as well. The Arab-Israeli conflict for much of this period was overshadowed by intra-Arab rivalries. The Egyptian-Syrian union as the United Arab Republic (February 1958–September 1961), originally hailed as the first step toward true Arab unity, dissolved in bitterness, leading Syria from that point to present itself as in the vanguard of Arab nationalism, directly challenging Nasser's leadership of the "progressive Arab bloc." Simultaneously both Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, condemned and occasionally called for the overthrow of "reactionary" monarchies such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan. [Files from the years 1957-60](#) cover Arab League meetings where these differences were aired as well as British concern for the fate of Jordan's King Husayn.

The mid-1960s saw the re-emergence to prominence of the Palestinian question with the formation of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964, sponsored by Egypt, and the appearance of al-Fatah, led by young Palestinians among whom was Yasser Arafat. Al-Fatah was then separate from

and opposed to the PLO, and undertook raids into Israel from 1965 onward, sponsored by Syria. The Palestinian issue now became a staple of Arab invective with Nasser being charged with being “soft” on Palestine and afraid of Israel, symbolized by the UNEF forces in the Sinai. Further files introduce [the PLO and Fatah](#) as of 1965 and devote attention to Palestinian issues and factions from 1965 through 1967. The general build up to the 1967 War and its consequences, including Palestinian activities and politics, appears in Files FCO 8/44, 636, 679, FCO 17/219, 526, 637, 690, FCO 39/18, FCO 73/124, FO 174/396-406, and PREM 13/1617-1624. PREM 13/1623-1624 contain material on negotiations at the United Nations leading to issuance of Security Council Resolution 242

III. 1968–1970

Files for these years contain much material on the increasingly unstable situation in Jordan in 1970 that led to civil war. At that time Jordan housed the headquarters of the Palestinian resistance. Rival Palestinian factions within the PLO called for the overthrow of Jordan’s King Husayn. At the same time, Palestinian raids from Jordan into Israel, including the newly occupied West Bank, resulted in major Israeli retaliatory raids, further threatening the regime. These files, many marked “[Internal Situation in Jordan](#),” provide evidence of British concern for the stability of King Husayn’s government as he faced Palestinian defiance of his authority and the external threat of further Israeli assaults. They end (PREM 15/123-125) with the outbreak of combat in September 1970 and the death of Egypt’s Nasser, setting the stage for removal of the Palestinian resistance to Lebanon, and the accession to power in Egypt of Anwar al-Sadat. Over time, these developments would confirm that Lebanon would become a new front for the Arab-Israeli conflict, and, in Egypt, that its leadership would seek a negotiated path to remove itself from the conflict, realized by the end of the decade.

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