

## Politics in the Middle East First Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

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### 1. Palestine and Zionism

Marking the beginning of the political activities in Palestine proves to be a difficult and also controversial issue. With respect to this matter, two perspectives can be differentiated: according to the first one, the contemporary state of Israel is the last phase of the Jewish presence in Palestine (which had begun in the time of Abraham, the first Patriarch), whereas the second claims that the political life was determined by the confrontation of Jewish and Arabic nationalisms in the 19th century<sup>1</sup>. Undoubtedly, both statements are based on a real, historical foundation.

The first of the two theses was adopted by the Zionist movement and it states that the history of the Jews is in exact accordance with the events described in the Bible, culminating in the establishment of the kingdom successively ruled by Saul, David and Solomon. After Solomon's death, the kingdom was divided and many Jews were killed or exiled as a consequence of the Babylonian expeditions. Other occupants of Palestine (the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans) more or less allowed a large part of the community to return, as well as to rebuild the Temple in the old capital of Jerusalem, symbol of Judaism. What is more, it is under these occupancies that the Jews achieved the right to practice their religion and a certain political autonomy. Nevertheless, except for a short period of time, between 141 and 63 BC, they did not manage to gain independence. In 66 AD, a strong rebellion against the Roman administration broke out and the Temple was

destroyed for the second time. Between 132–135, the Romans fought the rebels led by Simon Bar Kochba and, after massacring them, they decided to entirely destroy Jerusalem and exile the majority of the Jewish population. The exiled or the diaspora spread in North Africa, Middle East and Europe, but a small Jewish community managed to survive other waves of invaders: the Persians, the Byzantines, the Arabs, the Crusaders, the Turks and eventually the British ruled over Palestine. Their attitude towards the Jewish community was, with few exceptions, quite permissive.

The starting point for the second thesis that refers to the Palestinian political life is the 19th century, an important age for the formation of national states. At that time, Palestine had been under Ottoman control and it was part of the vilayet of Syria. The population, may it be Jewish or Arab, was exploited by the imperial corrupt administration.

The diaspora still comprised the biggest part of the Jewish population, with large communities in Southern and Central Europe. Almost everywhere, the Israelites raised the suspicions of both the common people and of the ruling class, which not only tolerated, but also encouraged the abuses the Israelites were subjected to. But it is in the Russian Empire that the Jews had to face the toughest treatment in Modern Times. In this state, the Israelites were not allowed to own properties, they could only have a limited number of jobs and paid excessive, discriminatory taxes. A large number of young Jews were recruited by the

Russian army, almost always sent to the front line, having to endure the abuses of the officers.

During the first half of the 19th century, large communities are forcefully assimilated or obliged to renounce Judaism. The reforms initiated by Tsar Alexander II seemed to bring all these atrocities to an end, by giving numerous rights to the Jews and culminating in the permission to actively take part in discussing and solving state affairs. The *Haskalah*, or Jewish Enlightenment, was an intellectual movement in Europe, inspired by the European Enlightenment of the 18th century, which encouraged the emancipation of the young people, by their total involvement in the Russian society. Another organization fighting for the emancipation of the Jews was also founded in France by the elites of the community: the Universal Israelite Alliance.

Following the tragic event that shook Russia in 1881, the assassination of Tsar Alexander II by a representative of the terrorist group *Narodnaya Volya*<sup>2</sup>, his son, Alexander III, came to the throne, but he proved to be a fierce enemy of all the minorities in the empire. The more than five million Russian Jews fell victims to a new type of repression, called pogrom<sup>3</sup>. Millions of Jews ran across the western border, but they were not treated better as refugees in the neighbouring countries either, so many of them emigrated to the United States, Latin America or Palestine. Those who chose the territory of the old state of Israel were pushed by a complex motivation that reflected a new way of responding to persecutions, that is the development of a nationalism based on the Jewish identity<sup>4</sup>. What must also be mentioned is the fact that many immigrants were influenced by the writings of the rabbis Judah Alkalai and Zvi Hirsch Kalischer, who preached about the return of the Jewish people to Zion, in order to pave the way for the return of the Messiah. On the other hand, being more pragmatical and aware of the dangers of anti-Semitism, many authors of Jewish origin, like Moses Hess,

Moshe Lilienblum, Peres Smolenskin or Leo Pinsker used their writing or the press in order to encourage the mass emigration of the Jews and the establishment of a state. Towards 1890, this movement will be named "Zionism" by the Austrian philosopher Nathan Birnbaum. The term derives from the Hebrew word "Zion", referring both to the Kingdom of Heaven and to the city of Jerusalem<sup>5</sup>.

The first Zionist conference took place in November 1884, in Katowice. On this occasion, the first steps were taken towards the establishment of an organization having Pinsker as president and Lillienblum as secretary<sup>6</sup>. Political Zionism also showed its first results: with the help of the French baron Edmond de Rothschild, 17 agricultural colonies were founded in Palestine and a small number of European Jews settled down on this territory.

But the one considered by historians as the founder of modern political Zionism is the well-known author Theodor Herzl. The actions he undertook undoubtedly led to the creation of the state of Israel half a century later.

It is worth mentioning a few elements of his biography. He was born in Budapest in 1860 and he studied law in Vienna. He was very interested in literature and journalism and he concentrated on these fields of activity to the cost of his profession. In 1891, he became the Vienna *Neue Freie Presse* newspaper correspondent. He joyfully settled down in the capital of France.

Although as a youth he claimed to be an advocate of the Jews' assimilation policy, his political beliefs were radically changed after the outbreak of anti-Semitism, triggered by the Dreyfus affair.

In Paris, Herzl wrote "*Der Judenstaat*", in which he envisioned the founding of a future Jewish state. The first fragments were published in London, in the "*Jewish Chronicle*", on 17<sup>th</sup> January 1896<sup>7</sup>.

The work was at first harshly criticized by both the ultra-Orthodox rabbis and the Jewish elites in Europe. They were joined by the

assimilationist Jews, who considered Herzl as a traitor and a coward and publicly demanded that he should be boycotted. But there were important persons who supported Theodor Herzl: the famous Hungarian doctor and writer Max Nordau, Nathan Birnbaum – the leader of the Jewish students in Vienna and the Londonese rabbi Hermann Adler. It was Nordau who underlined that in order to avoid a conflict with the Turks, the term “Judenstatt” should be replaced with “Heimstätte”. Nordau was also the one who coordinated a big part of the actions during early Zionism<sup>8</sup>.

In order to mark the beginning of the Zionist activities, Herzl organized the first purely Jewish political action, using all his connections to make sure it was internationally acknowledged. In August 1897, in the Swiss town of Basel, Herzl presided at the first Zionist Congress, which brought together about 200 delegates from all over Europe. In only three days, the Congress unanimously accepted the Basel Program, which stated that the Zionism's supreme objective was to seek to establish a home for the Jewish people in Palestine secured under public law<sup>9</sup>. The Zionists also decided to found the World Zionist Organization, with branches in all the European states and the USA.

In order to fulfill the objective of the Basel Program, the Zionists initiated political actions and negotiations and created two financial institutions: the Jewish Colonial Trust and the Jewish National Fund. Moreover, the Action Committee was also established, aiming to turn more and more Jewish communities into supporters of Zionism.

## **2. The Balfour Declaration and the British Mandate**

After Theodor Herzl's death, more forms of Zionism emerged, without affecting the homogeneity of the movement, though. The Russian journalist Ahad Ha-Am founded the concept of Cultural Zionism, according to which Jerusalem had to become the worldwide recognized centre of the Jewish

In only three years, the huge propaganda made by the Zionist leaders, as well as their meetings with several European leaders, made over 100,000 people adhere to the movement. Probably one of the most important was the one who would later become the first president of the State of Israel, Chaim Weizmann.

Herzl himself got involved in a real tour de force which damaged his health and actually proved to be fatal; even famous anti-Semitic leaders like Wilhelm II, the emperor of Germany or Wenzel von Plehve, the Russian minister of internal affairs, were persuaded to support the Zionist cause. But Herzl's audiences with sultan Abdul Hamid II in May 1901 and with the Grand Vizier in July 1902 did not have the expected and desired result: the recognition of the colonization of Palestine by the Jews<sup>10</sup>. Edmond de Rothschild gave up his hostile attitude towards Herzl and facilitated his meeting with the Marquis of Lansdowne, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs of the British Empire. Different territories were taken into consideration as possible solutions for the settlement of the Jews: Cyprus, El Arish and even Uganda, but they were all rejected at the Zionist congresses. The delegates were determined to accept only one place for the settlement of the Jews from the entire world, and that was Palestine. In 1904, Theodor Herzl passed away in the Austrian town of Edlach, but the Zionist movement was already well organized and had gained a friend: Great Britain.

In 1909, the socialist Zionists proposed the establishment of the first kibbutz in Deganya. First an experiment, the cooperative settlement will become an important instrument of rural development in Palestine. The religious Zionists hoped that Palestine would become a theocratic state.

The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century will bring the Zionist adherents the best results in the history of the movement: the commitment of the British Government, supported by the "Balfour Declaration" and the establishment of the state of Israel. After the fall of the Ottoman administration in Palestine, Chaim Weizmann, who had meanwhile become the president of the World Zionist Organization, started a series of negotiations with the representatives of the British Government. As a result, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Arthur J. Balfour, published a letter which was sent in November 1917 to Lord Lionel de Rothschild, after having previously been approved by the British Government. The content of the letter was the following: "His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country."<sup>11</sup>

Coming as an aftereffect of the Basel Program, the Balfour Declaration was approved by the great powers and subsequently endorsed by the League of Nations<sup>12</sup>. The British Mandate for Palestine was thereby created and Great Britain undertook to provide proper conditions as to secure the establishment of the Jewish people, as well as the protection of the Arab population. When the document was published, between 85,000-100,000 of a total population of 600,000 Jews lived in Palestine<sup>13</sup>.

After the Treaty of Sèvres, the Ottoman Empire lost its Arab territories, England controlling the Mandates of Mesopotamia and Palestine. In July 1920, Sir Herbert Samuel, an Anglo-Jewish politician, was appointed to the position of High Commissioner of Palestine<sup>14</sup>. His responsibility was to make sure that the British Government's decisions regarding the administration of Palestine were implemented.

In 1920, Hebrew became the official language of the Mandate, together with Arabic and English<sup>15</sup>.

The Arabs' discontent caused by the new "aliyah"<sup>16</sup> kept growing, therefore leading to conflicts with the newcomers. As minister of the colonies, Winston Churchill declared in London, in 1922, that the Jews should only occupy one part of Palestine. In order to increase the number of the immigrants, Chaim Weizmann created, in 1929, the Jewish Agency, an international body, aiming to provide the financial support for the new settlers in Palestine. Those who donated the funds were rich Jews, who did not entirely agree with objectives of Zionism. Following these actions, the "yishuv"<sup>17</sup> grew from 50,000 to 250,000 residents in 1939<sup>18</sup>.

In the summer of 1920, the Haganah<sup>19</sup> - a clandestine Jewish self-defense militia - was founded. Famous members of the Haganah included: Moshe Dayan, Shimon Peres, Chaim Herzog, Yitzhak Rabin or Ariel Sharon, important personalities of the future state of Israel.

The fear of the Arabs kept growing and their leaders rejected any attempt to create a Legislative Council. As a result of a large number of riots, more than 20,000 British soldiers were stationed in Palestine between 1928 and 1935. The publication of the Wilhelmstrasse Secret Archives revealed the active role of the Nazis in supporting the main organizer of the uprising, the former Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Mohammad Amin al-Husseini and his family<sup>20</sup>.

After the assassination of an important Palestinian political leader, Sheikh Izz ad-Din al-Qassam<sup>21</sup>, the 1936-1939 Arab revolt broke out, led by the Arab High Committee<sup>22</sup>. As a first consequence, large numbers of weapons were seized and the Arab leaders were arrested<sup>23</sup>.

In order to avert the massacre of Jews and to obtain information about the newcomers from the diaspora, an information service, "Sherut Yediot", was founded. Towards the end of the 30s, with the help of the Jewish

agents, the Haavara Agreement<sup>24</sup> was made, designed to help facilitate the emigration of German Jews to Palestine. Approximately 50,000 Jews emigrated to Palestine under this agreement.

In July 1937, another event came as a blow for the Zionists: a British Royal Commission of Inquiry headed by Lord Robert Peel recommended the partition of the territory of Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state, and keeping Jerusalem under a permanent mandate. Although the British Government rejected this decision, it tried to moderate,

unsuccessfully though, the negotiations between the two conflicting sides.

The Zionist leaders began to condemn the new policy of the mandatory power and to accuse the British Government of having betrayed the Jewish cause. In response, Great Britain issued a White Paper in 1939, stating that the Jewish immigration to Palestine was to be limited. On 28 February 1940 the British Government limited the acquisition of land by Jews. As a result of all these facts, the Anglo-Zionist Alliance came to an end.

### 3. Jewish Political Movements in Palestine (First Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century)

The political activity of the Jews in Israel dated back to the first Zionist settlements, but the political ideas and parties originated in the diaspora. In the absence of a sovereign parliament, the political parties tried to influence the local councils, may them be urban or rural, and also led the main Zionist organizations: the Histadrut<sup>25</sup>, Vaad Leumi<sup>26</sup>, the World Zionist Organization. All these political organizations were involved in different fields of activity, such as: education, culture creating homes for the immigrants and offering financial support and aid to the ones in need.

The first Jewish party in Palestine, Ha-Po'el Ha-Za'ir<sup>27</sup>, was founded in 1905 by two representatives of the second "aliyah", Joseph Vitkin and Joseph Sprinzak. One of its objectives was that the Jews should have exclusive control of all fields of economic activity in Palestine.

Another political party, Po'alei Zion<sup>28</sup>, founded in Russia and Austria-Hungary, started operating in Palestine in 1906. Two of its leaders, David Ben-Gurion and Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, worked together in order to produce a Marxist-type socialist platform. The first disagreements between the two parties soon followed, causing a group of dissatisfied people, led by Berl Katznelson and David

Remez, to publicly demand that the two parties should merge and get involved in the fight to find jobs for all the newcomers.

At its first congress in Jaffa, in the spring of 1907, Po'alei Zion set its main objective, that is the independence of the Jewish community in Palestine, and decided to send delegates to all the Zionist congresses. In order to keep pace, Ha-Po'el Ha-Za'ir contacted the socialists from the diaspora a few years later. However, in 1907, Joseph Vitkin's position caused misunderstandings among party members, in that he advanced the idea of making the farm workers independent. This step would have led to a modern agriculture and indirectly to a growth of the Jewish immigration to Palestine. The other leader of the party, Joseph Aharonovitz, was in favour of maintaining agricultural proletariat and totally supported the World Zionist Organization's plans regarding immigration. As a result, several members of Ha-Po'el Ha-Za'ir moved to Daganya in order to found the first kibbutz, whereas others chose to establish the first moshav in Nahalal.

On learning the problems the rival party was facing, Po'alei Zion informed its supporters that they would maintain the same Marxist doctrine and direct their efforts towards developing a powerful industry in Palestine.

Meanwhile, another party formed in the diaspora was becoming stronger and stronger. Mizrahi, or Merkaz Ruhani<sup>29</sup>, was a religious movement which appeared in the "Holy Land" in 1912. In the same year, a left-wing faction split away from it and formed Ha-Poel ha Mizrahi, its political program combining religious and socialist elements. The only ultraorthodox party, Agudat Israel, also appeared in 1912. Its members strongly opposed Zionism, claiming that only the Divinity could determine the fate of the Jews.

At the end of World War I, the independent group of the workers led by Berl Katzenelson advocated once again for the merge of all socialist parties. Only Po'alei Zion accepted the beginning of the negotiations and, together with the independent group, founded a new party in February 1919, Ahdut Ha-Avodah<sup>30</sup>. Joseph Trumpeldor advanced the idea of an alliance that would bring together all the socialist parties. Shortly after his death, in December 1920, Histadrut was created, a confederation of unions, joined both by members of Ha-Po'el Ha-Za'ir, Ahdut Ha-Avodah<sup>31</sup>, and members of smaller parties, such as Mifleget Po'alim Sozialistim "Mopsim"<sup>32</sup>, He-Halutz<sup>33</sup> or Ha-Shomer Ha-Za'ir.

The British Mandate allowed the Jews in Palestine to prepare for the election of a new body, Asfat Ha-Nivharim, which would represent the "yishuv" in front of the authorities. The year 1918 brought a set of rules for the elective process of the Jewish community in Palestine: on 18 December, in Jaffa, the legislative Forum of Eretz Israel decided that the minimum age for candidates would be 25 years old and for electors it would be 20 years old<sup>34</sup>.

The labour parties, as well as the independent candidates, immediately showed their intention to participate, therefore 19 electoral rolls were created. At the elections held on 19 April 1920, only the delegates of the communities of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and a few smaller cities were able to vote. The winner, Ahdut Ha-Avodah, obtained 70 of the

314 mandates, being surprisingly followed by the Sephardic Union (54 mandates) and Ha-Po'el Ha-Za'ir (41 mandates). The rest of the mandates, inconsiderable in number, though, were won by the Farmers Union, the Progressive Party, the religious party Mizrahi and the independent candidates.

In October 1920, at the inauguration of the assembly, three different coalitions were created: the first one, a right-wing coalition, was composed of Oriental and ultrareligious Jews; the main labour parties formed the second left-wing coalition; the third centrist coalition was represented mainly by the independent candidates and those of the Progressive Party.

But until 1925, the debates of the assembly were blocked by the violent protests of the ultraorthodox and Sephardic Jews, caused by the women's participation in voting and in the decision-making bodies, but also by the discussions related to the introduction of the income tax for natural persons.

On 6 December 1925, the elections for the second Asfat Ha-Nivharim took place. A new political party emerged and gained popularity: the Revisionist Movement, led by Vladimir Ze'ev Jabotinski, one of David Ben-Gurion's rivals. Jabotinsky's intention was to have an aggressive attitude towards the British administration. Moreover, there was a need for the acceleration of the immigration of the Jews from the diaspora, so that, once it reached a significant number, the "yishuv" would be able to claim independence. These new political ideas helped the party win 15 mandates of 201, but the left-wing parties still achieved victory.

The Palestinian Communist Party (PKP), illegally established in 1921, obtained 6 mandates in the Assembly. The second Vaad Leummi, turned into Superior Chamber, had 38 seats, of which 18 went to an alliance formed by the religious parties and the Farmers Union, 14 went to the two important socialist parties, the Revisionist Party received two mandates, the rest going to the feminist and progressive movements.

The elections were only later recognized by the British, on the 1<sup>st</sup> January 1928. In 1930, a set of measures intended to improve the elective system of the bicameral body was proposed: it was decided that the total number of the members of the Assembly would be 71 and the Superior Chamber would have 23 members. As for the electors, they were divided into three colleges, according to the different types of Jewish communities: the Askenazi Jews had 53 delegates, the Sephardi Jews had 15 delegates and the Yemenite Jews had 3 delegates.

The year 1930 brought the merger of the two important labour parties, *Ahdut Ha-Avodah* and *Ha-Po'el Ha-Za'ir*, thus fulfilling the dream of the Jewish socialists in Palestine. The newly-born party was called *Mapai* (*Mifleget Po'alei Erez Israel*)<sup>35</sup>. From an ideological point of view, *Mapai* was oriented towards the recognition of the middle class, without giving up the socialist program<sup>36</sup>.

One year later, *Mapai* proved its superiority at the elections within the Jewish community in Palestine: on 5 January 1931, the Labour Party had 27 delegates, being followed by the Revisionists with 16 delegates and the religious party with 11. At the elections for *Vaad Leummi*, *Mapai* was also victorious, obtaining 11 mandates. The

Revisionists tried to boycott the elections for the Superior Chamber, but eventually they were content with the 5 seats they received one year later. The Assembly lasted for 13 years, the date of the elections being many times postponed because of the fights with the Arabs. The growth of the "yishuv" brought even more sympathizers for *Mapai*, and the Jewish Agency fell under the total control of David Ben-Gurion starting with 1935.

Discontent with the close relations between the Jewish Agency and *Mapai*, the Revisionists publicly accused Chaim Weizmann of cooperating with the British Government and strived to attract the representatives of the middle class on their side, so as to use their funds in order to counter-balance the socialists' domination. In 1935, most of the Revisionists left the World Zionist Organization.

The Zionist Movement was also divided between *Hitahadut*<sup>37</sup>, called Group A or the "Progressives" and *Berit*, called Group B, subsequently turned into the General Zionist Party<sup>38</sup>. The tensions were caused by the differences of opinion regarding issues such as: secular or religious education, income-taxing, the attitude towards the Arab community etc.

#### 4. The End of the British Mandate and the Political Organization Until Gaining Independence

During the British Mandate, the "yishuv" grew from 50,000 to 600,000 members. Most of the newcomers were from Central and Eastern Europe and had great support from Vladimir Jabotinsky's organization. In 1942, the leaders of Nazi Germany decided at Wannsee to systematically exterminate all Jews. 9,500,000 Jews lived in Europe in 1939; in 1945, there were less than 2,750,000<sup>39</sup>. The leaders of the Jews in Palestine answered back by creating *Palmach* in 1941, a commando unit that eliminated a part of the Germans from the Middle East.

Coexistence with the Arabs was becoming more and more difficult: massacres were worsening and peace seemed an impossible thing. Professor Judah L. Magnes made several attempts to establish a single Arab-Jewish state in Palestine in order to guarantee the same rights for both ethnic groups, but they were violently rejected by the radicals of the two sides.

The end of the war apparently brought peace to Palestine. The occurring events convinced the Jewish Agency to forget about the conflicts with Great Britain and focus on

the effort to save the ones in danger, especially since the British authorities continued to limit immigration drastically, even attacking the refugee ships.

For many of the Palestinian Jews, the new enemy, that is the British occupier, was becoming as dangerous as Nazism or the Muslim community. The Revisionist leaders were against the Haganah, which they considered ineffective and, in the spring of 1937, they decided to create a new paramilitary organization, Irgun Zevai Leumi<sup>40</sup>. Irgun basically depended on Vladimir Jabotinsky and the Revisionist movement. Its main leaders were at first David Raziel, Moshe Rosenberg and Abraham Stern. They were later joined by other principals, like Robert Bitcker, an ex-officer of the British army, or Menachem Begin and Nathan Yalin Mor, two young leaders of the Jewish community in Poland<sup>41</sup>.

Begin controlled the organization seven years later and decided to involve it in the fight against the British occupier. Climax was reached in July 1946, when a blast almost destroyed "King David" hotel in Jerusalem, the headquarters of the British administration and killed 91 persons, British, Arabs and Jews. The terrorist attack was condemned by the Haganah, who would immediately develop a program meant to annihilate Irgun.

Another Jewish group involved in multiple terrorist actions was Lohamei Herut Israel or "Stern Gang", whose chief preoccupation was murdering the ones who collaborated with either the English or the Arabs.

Alyiah Hadassah, a new party formed in 1942 by the immigrants who came from Germany, aroused the indignation of most of the political parties in Palestine. Its members advocated for the continuation of the British Mandate (a successful subject after the "King David" attack) and signing an agreement with the Arabs.

On 1<sup>st</sup> August 1944, the elections for the fourth Asefat Ha-Nivharim were held. The Revisionists and the Sephards boycotted them and Agudat Israel was forbidden. Victory

belonged to the left wing: the Superior Chamber, made of 42 members, had 23 representatives of the socialist parties.

The main Arab leaders of that time met in Cairo on 23 March 1945 and created "The Arab League"<sup>42</sup>. All the Jewish political leaders were concerned about this action.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1947, Great Britain appealed to the United Nations to initiate a series of discussions that would result in solving the Palestinian problem. On 29<sup>th</sup> December 1947, it was decided to have two independent states, a Jewish state and an Arab state, and the area to be occupied by the Jewish state was about 14,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Jerusalem was placed under the control of the United Nations and the British Mandate was supposed to have ended by 1<sup>st</sup> August 1948<sup>43</sup>.

The Jewish political parties had different reactions: the left-wing accepted the UN decisions, though not very enthusiastically, the far left rejected them from ideological reasons, whereas the right-wing, formed of Revisionist and ultrareligious Jews, decided to never recognize the Arab state in Palestine.

Violent manifestations of the Arabs soon followed: coexistence with a Jewish state seemed unacceptable. Moreover, their leaders claimed that it was not the Arabs who should pay for the crimes the Europeans committed against the Jews in time.

But Great Britain decided to abandon Palestine on 15<sup>th</sup> May 1948, without allowing the UN though to intervene in the territory before the 1<sup>st</sup> of May.

In January 1948, Vaad Leumi, the National Council of the Palestinian Jews, decided to proclaim the independence of a Jewish state after the British retreat, which would be organized according to the General Assembly of the United Nations. In 1948, the conflict between the newly-established state of Israel and its Arab neighbours resumed the old conflict generated by the Balfour Declaration: the situation of the Arab population in Palestine. The plan proposed a year before by the UN General Assembly Resolution 181 did not favour the Arabs.



The violent birth of the state of Israel created waves of refugees in the area designated for the Arabs: about 1.3 million Arabs lived in Palestine before the war. But towards the end of 1949, about 20% of the Palestinian Jews chose exile and moved to countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Egypt. About 200,000 of the ones who remained fled to Gaza and over 300,000 to Jericho, which would be a territory annexed to Jordan, starting with 1950. There were also the ones who did not manage to run across the borders of the state of Israel and remained there.

### 5. The Arabian Peninsula

Even though there were many states in this region in time, the one founded by the Saud Dynasty will survive until nowadays. The founder of the family, Muhammad bin Saud from the town of Ad-Dirrya and the Sunni cleric Muhammad bin Abd-al-Ahad established a state in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Little by little, the Saud clan accumulated capital and influence, fighting for autonomy with the Ottoman Empire and with the rival families in the region.

The two Saudi states created before the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had no capacity to resist for a long time and they were not able to oppose to the Ottomans or the al-Rashid tribe. But in 1902, Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud's troops conquered the city of Riyadh, the bastion of the al-Rashid dynasty. Between 1913 and 1926, taking advantage of the British campaign against the Ottoman Empire, the Saudis gradually extended towards the regions of Nejd and Hejaz<sup>45</sup>.

In 1924, the Sharif of Mecca<sup>46</sup>, Hussein bin Ali<sup>47</sup>, proclaimed himself Caliph after the Ottoman caliphate was abolished. Saud and his Wahhabite<sup>48</sup> army invaded Mecca and chased away the impostor. Two years later, at a pan-Islamic conference, the Saudi leader was given the authority to administer the holy Islamic sites, Mecca and Medina<sup>49</sup>.

The dream of the Arab population to have an independent state was nipped in the bud: Egypt and Jordan refused to support this objective and Israel offered no political solution. Instead of actively supporting the Arab population in Palestine, the Arab League mostly regarded it as a weapon against the Jewish state.

It's in this period that the term „Palestinian” received the meaning it still has today, being used to name the people of Arab origin from the ex-Mandate of Palestine, excluding Israel<sup>44</sup>.

The risk that one leader should be replaced by another made the Saudis try to find ways of creating a distance between them and their allies from World War I, the British. On 10<sup>th</sup> May 1927, the Saudi diplomats took an important step towards achieving independence by signing the Treaty of Jeddah, according to which Great Britain ended its protectorate over Hejaz and Nejd. After five years, the whole state received a new name, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, proclaimed after eliminating the last hostile factions in the battle of Sibilla<sup>50</sup>.

The event of 1938 is of major importance for the country even nowadays: the huge oil fields discovered made the country one of the richest in the region, due to the immense amounts of money paid by the Americans.

This way, together with the prestige among the Sunnites, Saudi Arabia managed to become the most important Arab state in Asia. But the country's biggest handicap, besides the poor infrastructure, was still represented by the low demographic number.

As for the foreign affairs, the close connections with the British Empire, based on the personal relations between the king and some members of the government in London, will continue until the end of the World War II.

## 6. The Levant and Mesopotamia

From an ethnic and religious point of view, the Levant and Mesopotamia are very fragmented due to the big number of communities: Sunnites, Shia, Druzes, Maronites, Jews, Armenians, Kurds, orthodox Christians, Sufis etc.

By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the region was only considered an area of transit towards Asia on account of the weak control of the Ottoman Empire. The Sykes-Picot Agreement<sup>51</sup> highlighted the interest for that area shown by the world's major powers.

The end of the World War I and the fall of the Ottoman Empire brought chaos to the region. In 1920, after a short independence of Syria that was not internationally recognized, the world's major powers were given the authority to administer the different parts of the region, without taking into consideration the ethnic and religious points of view when dividing them arbitrarily<sup>52</sup>. This way the Great Lebanon was created to the detriment of Syria, which was split into a few autonomous states<sup>53</sup>: Aleppo, Jebel Druze, the Alawite State, the Sanjak of Alexandretta<sup>54</sup> and Damascus. With the Levant under French control, Transjordan and Mesopotamia were incorporated into the British Mandate. France and Great Britain signed an agreement which stipulated the obligation of the English not to undermine the French mandate, preventing the attempt to establish a great independent Arab kingdom<sup>55</sup>.

But the pressure of King Faisal's I supporters, as well as the frequent uprisings of the local population, determined the French to accept the formation of an autonomous Syrian Federation. The formation of a republic was proposed in the Franco-Syrian Treaty of 1936<sup>56</sup>, but Syrian independence was deferred until after the end of the war.

When it came to its internal affairs, Lebanon had greater freedom. On 1<sup>st</sup> September 1920, general Gouraud proclaimed the establishment of the Great Lebanon<sup>57</sup> under the French Mandate. Having this state

as a starting point, France formed the Lebanese Republic in 1926. In the 20's and the 30's, the first political parties were formed, some of them nationalist<sup>58</sup>. A constitution elaborated after the French model was adopted and the ethnic and religious groups were proportionally represented in the local parliament. Taking advantage of the fact that Paris was still under Nazi occupation, Lebanon gained independence in 1943.

The Emirate of Transjordan was an autonomous political division, being initially part of the Mandate of Palestine, subsequently withdrawn from it on Great Britain's request<sup>59</sup>. Emir Abdullah, member of the Hashemite family, became king. Great Britain now treated Jordan like an autonomous state and independence was gained in 1946<sup>60</sup>, together with the proclamation of sovereignty and Abdullah's recognition as king.

The Treaty of Sevres led to the Partitioning of the Ottoman Empire, as a result of which the British Mandate of Mesopotamia was formed. From the beginning, this territory proved extremely difficult to administer. The secret societies often generated outbreaks, which caused great trouble to the British army. In 1920, The Great Iraqi Revolution brought together Sunnis and Shias, tribes and cities, in a common effort against the foreign occupation.

At the 1921 Cairo Conference, the British chose the ex-sovereign of Syria, the Hashemite Faisal I, as leader of Iraq, crowning him as puppet-king. One year later, the so-called Anglo-Iraqi Treaty was signed, but it was considered as being humiliating for the Arab side, because it protected the interest of the British in the region. Meanwhile, with the help of the League of Nations, the status of the city of Mosul<sup>61</sup> was clarified in favour of Iraq. The second Anglo-Iraqi Treaty<sup>62</sup> stipulated a form of military collaboration for a period of time of 25 years, but, as a matter of fact, it certified the British occupation. On 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1932, Iraq became a member of the League of Nations as

an independent state, but it was forced to obey the conditions of the treaty with London and to accept the military presence on its territory. Faisal died in 1933 and was replaced by King Ghazi. The new sovereign was accused of being a pro-Fascist supporter, interfering with Great Britain's interests in the region. After

Ghazi's mysterious death in 1939, Faisal II came to throne.

As for its internal affairs, Iraq faced many threats, culminating with the government of the premier Rashid Ali, thought to be a Nazi supporter, superseded by another British occupation in 1941.

## 7. Persia (Iran)

The beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought important changes to Persia. As a result of the Constitutional Revolution, which was a street protest in fact, initiated at the end of 1905, the first parliament was founded, thus limiting the shah's power. The state ruled by the Qajar dynasty had been under foreign influence for a long time. After discovering the huge oil fields in 1908, Great Britain and Russia showed a greater interest in the area, as they had already signed a convention a year before, placing parts of Persia into their indirect control<sup>63</sup>.

Moreover, during the World War I, the country was occupied by the British and Russian armies, but the latter retreated after the Bolsheviks seized power and signed a convenient treaty of good-neighborhood. After a national emancipation movement, led by Reza Khan, the Qajar dynasty was superseded by the last Persian dynasty, Pahlavi, founded by Khan, who had proclaimed himself the shah<sup>64</sup>.

The 30's were used by the shah and his collaborators for the consolidation of power. Dictatorship, the elimination of the ex-collaborators, corruption, the violences of the army against the ethnic groups were highly criticized on an internal and international level as well.

## 8. Egypt

From a demographic point of view, Egypt was the most populated territory in the Middle East at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Being under foreign occupation for a long time strongly affected the Egyptians. The

The fundamentalists opposed the modernization of the Persian society and initiated many uprisings against the state authority after actions such as granting various rights to women.

From the point of view of the foreign affairs, the relations with Great Britain were deteriorated for a while, for reasons such as the shah's suppositions regarding the British involvement in the oil industry.

On 21<sup>st</sup> March 1935, the shah issued a decree demanding that the name of the country in foreign affairs should be changed to Iran. The end of the 30's and the beginning of the war found Pahlavi more and more dependent on his troops, paying them huge amounts of money in order to be sure of their loyalty.

The attitude of the shah towards the Jews was a positive fact, though revolting for the Islamists, as his intention was to protect and integrate them.

In 1941, after his country was invaded by the Soviets and the British, he was forced to abdicate in favour of his son and was exiled, passing away three years later. Fortunately for the new shah, the Teheran Conference guaranteed the borders of Iran and the independence of the country.

1906 Denshaway incident<sup>65</sup> agitated the population even more. As it happened in all the Middle East, the national movement had a mainly anticolonial character, pan-Islamic, opposing the Western powers<sup>66</sup>.

In response to the British Protectorate declared on the occasion of World War I, the Egyptian nationalists demanded that Egypt should be recognized as independent at the 1919 Peace Conference in Paris. The leader of this delegation<sup>67</sup>, Saad Zaghlul, subsequently founded a nationalist party. His arrest triggered many violent protests, known as the First Egyptian Revolution<sup>68</sup>. The event had victims on both sides, but it culminated in gaining independence (1922)<sup>69</sup> and adopting a constitution (1923). But the fact that Great Britain still maintained its troops in Cairo, Alexandria and in the territory aroused the discontent of the Egyptians, which eventually made both sides sign the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty in 1936. The treaty demanded that Great Britain should withdraw its entire army

from Egypt, except for the troops meant to defend the Suez Canal, and help with the training of the Egyptian army.

The death of King Fuad brought his son, Farouk I, to the throne and he ruled until 26<sup>th</sup> July 1952.

The appearance of the Communist Party (1925) and the Muslim Brothers or The Brotherhood (1928), the extremist political groups, generated internal political conflicts. For the Muslim Brothers, the Koran represented the true constitution and their major objective was to proclaim the Great Caliphate<sup>70</sup>.

During the entire war, Egypt was a military base of the Allies for their World War II missions.

#### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Clive Jones, Emma C. Murphy, *Israel: Challenges to Identity Democracy and the State*, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> "People's Will" in the Russian language.

<sup>3</sup> "devastation" in the Russian language.

<sup>4</sup> Clive Jones, Emma C. Murphy *op.cit.*, p. 6

<sup>5</sup> Iain McLean, *Oxford Dicționar de politică*, București, Univers Enciclopedic, 2001, p. 410.

<sup>6</sup> André Chouraqui, *Statul Israel*, București, Corint, 2001, p. 20.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Johnson, *O istorie a evreilor*, București, Hasefer, 2003, p. 314.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 315.

<sup>9</sup> André Chouraqui, *op.cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 22.

<sup>11</sup> Original text.

<sup>12</sup> Claude Klein, *Israel*, București, BIC ALL, 2003, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Johnson, *op.cit.*, p. 338.

<sup>14</sup> André Chouraqui, *op.cit.*, 2001, p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> Claude Klein, *op.cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> "Immigration wave" in Hebrew

<sup>17</sup> Term used for the Jews' settlement in Palestine.

<sup>18</sup> Clive Jones, Emma C. Murphy, *op.cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> "Defence" in Hebrew.

<sup>20</sup> André Chouraqui, *op.cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>21</sup> Leader of the Arab terrorist group the Black Hand.

<sup>22</sup> Formed in 1936 from small parties and obscure Arab political groups, such as the National Defence Party, the Palestinian Arab Party, the National Bloc, Independence Party and Reform Party.

<sup>23</sup> Morris, Benny, *Righteous Victims*, New York, Knopf, 1999, p. 159.

<sup>24</sup> "Transfer" in Hebrew.

<sup>25</sup> Union Federation.

<sup>26</sup> Jewish National Council.

<sup>27</sup> "The Young Worker" in Hebrew.

<sup>28</sup> "Workers of Zion" in Hebrew.

<sup>29</sup> "The Spiritual Center" in Hebrew.

<sup>30</sup> "Unity of Work" in Hebrew.

- <sup>31</sup> Asher Arian, *The Second Republic: Politics in Israel*. New Jersey, Chatam House Publisher Inc, 1998, p.109.
- <sup>32</sup> "The Socialist Workers' Party", in Hebrew.
- <sup>33</sup> Association of Eastern Europe Jews.
- <sup>34</sup> The assembly was only formed by Zionists and ultraorthodox Jews.
- <sup>35</sup> "Labour Party" in Hebrew.
- <sup>36</sup> Don Peretz, *The Government and Politics of Israel*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1988, p. 91.
- <sup>37</sup> "Federation" in Hebrew.
- <sup>38</sup> Arian Asher, *op.cit.*, p. 125.
- <sup>39</sup> André Chouraqui, *op.cit.*, p. 28.
- <sup>40</sup> The National Military Organization.
- <sup>41</sup> Roger Faligot, Remi Kauffer, *Istoria mondială a serviviilor secrete*, vol. 2, București, Nemira, 2000.
- <sup>42</sup> Douglas Bokovoy, Michael Wolffsohn, *Israel*, Opladen, Leske+Budrich, 2003, p. 215.
- <sup>43</sup> Bernard Wasserstein, *Israel & Palestine*, London, Profile Books, 2003, p. 118.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 25.
- <sup>45</sup> Beverly Milton-Edwards, *Contemporary Politics in the Middle East*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2006, p. 26.
- <sup>46</sup> Bernard Wasserstein, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
- <sup>47</sup> Belonged to the Hashemite family.
- <sup>48</sup> A conservative reform movement of Sunni Islam.
- <sup>49</sup> Francois Massoulie, *Conflictele din Oriental Mijlociu*, București, ALL, 2003, p. 29.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 28.
- <sup>51</sup> David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East*, New York, Owl, 1989, p. 20.
- <sup>52</sup> Beverly Milton-Edwards, *Contemporary Politics in the Middle East*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2006, p. 59.
- <sup>53</sup> San Remo Conference (1920).
- <sup>54</sup> Subsequently ceded to Turkey.
- <sup>55</sup> David Fromkin, *op.cit.*, p. 29.
- <sup>56</sup> Not ratified by France.
- <sup>57</sup> Officially L'Etat du Grand Liban.
- <sup>58</sup> Francois Massoulie, *op.cit.*, p. 47.
- <sup>59</sup> Beverly Milton-Edwards, *op.cit.*, p. 27.
- <sup>60</sup> By the London Treaty.
- <sup>61</sup> The dispute regarding Mosul was clarified in 1926, after Turkey, Iraq and Great Britain had signed a treaty.
- <sup>62</sup> Signed on 30<sup>th</sup> June 1930.
- <sup>63</sup> Roger Adelson, *London and the Invention of the Middle East: Money, Power and War, 1902-1922*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press. 1995, pp. 59-62.
- <sup>64</sup> Son Mohammad Reza was named his successor.
- <sup>65</sup> A fight between a few British officers and some Egyptians at a pigeon-hunt, resulting in the death sentence of one of the Egyptians.
- <sup>66</sup> David Fromkin, *op.cit.*, p. 49.
- <sup>67</sup> Also called "wafd" وفاق.
- <sup>68</sup> P.J. Vatikiotis, *The History of Modern Egypt*, 4th edition, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1992, p. 267.
- <sup>69</sup> Sultan Fuad I (1868-1936) became the first king.
- <sup>70</sup> Francois Massoulie, *op.cit.*, p. 34.