

**MATERIALS FOR THE STUDY OF THE WORK AND THOUGHT
OF ARNOLD J. TOYNBEE**

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GREAT BRITAIN'S RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE CATASTROPHE IN PALESTINE

By Arnold J. Toynbee

In taking a measure [the Balfour Declaration] so well calculated to help them to win a war in which they were fighting for their lives, it is comprehensible that the Western Powers should not have looked ahead beyond the hoped-for achievement of victory. They were less blameworthy for making dubious commitments concerning Palestine to Jews and Arabs while the First World War was still being fought than they were for shirking their consequent duty, in the subsequent interval of peace, to face the equivocal situation which they had created in Palestine under the stress of a world war and to liquidate it at the earliest possible date with the least possible injury and injustice to the parties to whom their war-time commitments had been made. The Western Power that bore the lion's share of the responsibility for the inter-war failure to retrieve the position in Palestine was Great Britain, who, first as Occupying Power and then as Mandatory, was conducting the administration of Palestine from a.d. 1917 to a.d. 1948.

Throughout those crucial thirty years the British attitude – common to all parties and adopted by successive ministries – was one of culpably wilful blindness. The Palestine which the British had conquered from the 'Osmanlis in a.d. 1917-18 was a province of an Ottoman World in which mixed populations had been exploding, with a fearful cost in human suffering, ever since the extermination of the Muslim diasporà in the Morea by Greek Orthodox Christian insurgents in a.d. 1821. Even British statesmen who were ignorant of nineteenth-century Ottoman history could not be unaware of the fate that had overtaken the Armenian diaspora in Anatolia in a.d. 1915; and, after that portent in this adjacent Ottoman territory had failed to deter the British from embarking in Palestine on the deliberate creation of a new explosive mixture of mutually incompatible national ingredients, the fate that overtook the Greek diasporà in Anatolia in a.d. 1922 might still have counselled them to reconsider the Balfour Declaration before it was too late. A third warning was given

them by the explosion that inevitably followed in Palestine itself in a.d. 1929. Yet, in spite of these awful object lessons, British statesmanship doggedly kept Palestine headed for manifest disaster while the local situation went from bad to worse until it got completely out of hand as a result of the advent of the Nazis to power in Germany, their unprecedentedly inhuman persecution of the Jews in the Reich, and the extension of this campaign of “genocide” to the rest of Continental Europe after the outbreak of a Second World War in a.d. 1939.

From first to last, there was never a practicable plan in British minds for peacefully stabilizing the explosively unstable situation in Palestine which Britain had deliberately created. The British Government did not attempt to stabilize even the respective numbers of the Arab and Jewish elements in the population until the Jewish minority had been allowed to become so large – «approaching a third of the entire population of the country»¹ – that there was no longer any chance of its being willing to remain a minority in a bi-national state and no longer any possibility of such a state, if ever constituted on paper, finding it possible to govern itself through the Western institution of majority rule. Though the Mandatory Power’s official apologists might offer juridical proofs that British promises to Jews and Arabs in respect of Palestine were not formally incompatible, it would have been difficult to argue that the undeniably incompatible expectations which had been engendered by these British promises in Jewish and in Arab minds were not legitimate inferences, on their part, from the British declarations². Whatever an official British spokesman might say, or the Jewish Agency profess, during the earlier phases of the mandatory regime, it was psychologically impossible to promise the establishment in Palestine of «a national home» for the Jewish people – specifically including the facilitation of Jewish immigration and the encouragement of close settlement by Jews on the land – without encouraging Zionists to look forward to the

¹ United Kingdom Parliamentary Paper Cmd. 6019 of the 17th May. 1039. para. 6.

² In the United Kingdom Parliamentary Paper Cmd. 6019 of the 17th May, 1939, para. 3, the Mandatory Power confessed that «the Royal Commission [of a.d. 1936-7] and previous commissions of enquiry» had «drawn attention to the ambiguity of certain expressions in the Mandate, such as the expression ‘a national home for the Jewish people’, and» that they had «found in this ambiguity and in the resulting uncertainty as to the objectives of policy a fundamental cause of unrest and hostility between Arabs and Jews».

establishment there of a Jewish national state, notwithstanding the stipulation in the Balfour Declaration and in the Mandate that the rights and position of other sections of the population should not be prejudiced, and likewise impossible to promise «the development of self-governing institutions»³ to a country in which the Arab element in the population was in an overwhelming majority, at the time when the mandate was conferred and the terms of the mandate were worked out⁴, without encouraging Palestinian Arabs to look forward to the establishment in Palestine of an Arab national state, notwithstanding the stipulation in the Mandate, as well as in the Balfour Declaration, requiring the establishment in Palestine of a Jewish «national home».

The object lesson of Turco-Greek and Turco-Armenian relations during a century culminating in the two catastrophes of a.d. 1915 and a.d. 1922 confuted in advance the Mandatory Power's official pious belief that the mandatory regime would somehow miraculously save Great Britain's honour by engendering one day a self-governing bi-national Arab-Jewish Palestinian state⁵. In a memorandum of the 3rd June, 1922, Sir Winston Churchill, as British Secretary of State for the Colonies, had the hardihood to commit himself

³ Mandate for Palestine, Article 2.

⁴ The mandate for Palestine was conferred on Great Britain on the 25th April, 1920, by the Supreme Council of the Allied Powers during the Conference of San Remo; the final text of the instrument in which the mandate was embodied was dated the 24th July, 1922; the mandate officially came into force on the 29th September, 1923. According to a census taken by the Mandatory Power on the 23rd October, 1922, there were in Palestine on that date 671,098 Arabs (including Matawilah, Druses, and Christians, as well as Sunnis), 83,704 Jews, and 2,290 others (Samaritans, Bahil'is, Hindus, Sikhs) in a total population of 757,182 (Palestine Government, *Report and General Abstract of the Census of 1922*, p. 58). On this showing, the Arab majority in the population of Palestine amounted to nearly 90 per cent, of the whole at the date when the second article of the Mandate for Palestine was drafted.

⁵ At as late a date as the 17th May, 1939, when the hands of the clock of History were indicating the approach of the eleventh hour, the United Kingdom Government were still declaring that, apart from their specific obligation under the Mandate «to secure the development of self-governing institutions in Palestine», «they would regard it as contrary to the whole spirit of the mandate system that the population of Palestine should remain for ever under mandatory tutelage». Yet, in the same paragraph of the same state paper (Cmd. 6019 of 1939, para. 8), they found themselves constrained to confess that, while they desired «to see established ultimately an independent Palestine state (...) in which the two peoples in Palestine, Arabs and Jews», could «share authority in government in such a way that the essential interests of each» would be «secured», they were «unable at present to foresee the exact constitutional forms which government in Palestine» would «eventually take'» and (para. 10 (V)) were making «no proposals at this stage regarding the establishment of an elective legislature».

to the opinion that the Balfour Declaration did «not contain or imply anything which need cause either alarm to the Arab population of Palestine or disappointment to the Jews». The harsh truth was that, in issuing the Balfour Declaration and subsequently undertaking a mandate for Palestine in which its terms were embodied, Great Britain was condemning one or other of the two communities concerned to suffer a fearful catastrophe in the same breath in which she was undertaking to make herself responsible «for safeguarding the civil and religious rights of all the inhabitants of Palestine, irrespective of race and religion».

In the light of sensational events in adjacent Ottoman territories it could be predicted with assurance after a.d. 1915, and with double assurance after a.d. 1922, that the mandatory regime in Palestine would end in the death or eviction or subjugation of hundreds of thousands of human beings. The only open question was whether these non-divinely predestined victims were to be Arab or Jewish men, women, and children; and the denouement in a.d. 1948-9 bore out the contentions made in the Arab reply to the Churchill memorandum of a.d. 1922. It was incontestable that, during the thirty years ending in the terminal date of the British mandatory regime in a.d. 1948, the three hundred thousand Jewish immigrants introduced into Palestine in the course of that period entered the country «by the might of England against the will of the people, who» were «convinced that these» had «come to strangle them»⁶; and the event proved that this British action did in truth mean the Palestinian Arabs' «extinction sooner or later», in spite of the clear undertaking in the

⁶ According to the United Kingdom Parliamentary Paper Cmd. 6019 of the 17th May, 1939, para. 6, more than 300,000 Jews had immigrated into Palestine by that date since the publication of the Churchill memorandum of the 3rd June, 1922, and the population of the Jewish national home had risen to some 450,000 (nearly a third of the total population of the country). According to the Government of Palestine, *Statistical Abstract, 1943* (Jerusalem 1944, Government Printing Press), p. 3, the period 1922 to 1942 saw a total increase of 400,618 in the Jewish population of Palestine, from 83,790 to 484,408 (29.9 per cent, of the total population of the country), and, of these 400,618 additional Jewish souls, no less than 305,803 were immigrants and no more than 94,815 were the fruit of natural increase. The total increase in the number of the Palestinian Muslims during the same period was 406,115; of these, no less than 386,100 were the fruit of natural increase (thanks to the cessation of Ottoman military conscription and the improvement in public health under a British mandatory régime): and, of the 20,015 souls, out of these 406,115, that were added to the Muslim population of Palestine during these years from sources other than natural increase, no more than 10,315 were immigrants; for 9,700 of them were inhabitants of districts transferred to Palestine from the Lebanon and Syria in a.d. 1923.

Balfour Declaration and the Mandate that nothing should be done that might prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine.