

History 12

Lecture Notes: Egypt & Palestine, 1945-1956.

Pan Pan-Arabism:

Though in its initial period of expansion Islam was a unified political entity, it later fragmented, first into racial units (Arab, Turkic, Persian and other) and later into yet smaller sovereign units. A constant theme in Arab history has since been the dream of reuniting these Arab-populated lands. This has been further complicated by the European imperial presence in Africa and the Middle East.

In a 1931 Islamic conference in Jerusalem the participants announced: "The Arab lands are a complete and indivisible whole... all efforts are to be directed towards their complete independence in their entirety and unified." The foundation of the **Arab League** in 1945 was a first step toward this goal, uniting Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Yemen in a common organization. By 1980 it had 20 members, but internal divisions prevented real political unification of its parts - despite several efforts to achieve integration.

One of the chief proponents of pan-Arabism was the Egyptian leader, **Gamal Abdel Nasser**, who, throughout the 1950's and 1960's directed his energies toward the unification of Arab lands under the direction of the strongest Arab state, Egypt. Little was accomplished of lasting effect, but the tension between nationalism and Arab internationalism has been a constant factor in Arab history.

Zionism:

Another key political influence in the region, and one which is diametrically opposed to pan-Arabism, is the notion of establishing a Jewish homeland in the Middle East. Since the diaspora, when the Jews in classical times were forcefully dispersed by the powerful empires of the period, Jews have sought to re-establish a national homeland.

In the late 19th century, Jewish communal settlements - farming communities called **kibbutzim** - were established in the area of Palestine (their promised land during the classical period). The first such settlement had been set up in 1879 at what is now Tel Aviv; by 1914 there were 40 kibbutzim and the Jewish population of Jerusalem and other Palestinian times was swelled by immigration.

The British, who controlled the Palestinian mandate after World War I, found that they had made conflicting promises to Jews and Arabs. Both had been promised national homelands. The aims of the **Balfour Declaration** and the promises made to Arabs who rebelled against the Turks were irreconcilable. Trouble in Egypt with the nationalist Wafd Party resulted in a granting of independence to that region in 1922 (though British troops remained in

the Canal Zone) and trouble in Iraq brought independence there in 1932. Palestine was a much more difficult situation to deal with, however, as both Arabs and Jews fought each other and the British to achieve their own goals. The British tried to placate the Arab majority in the region by first insisting that a Jewish homeland did not necessarily mean a Jewish state, but continuing high levels of Jewish immigration in the 1920's was regarded with great hostility by the Arabs. As Hitler's persecution of the Jews increased the number of prospective immigrants to Palestine, the Arabs demanded an end to Jewish immigration. Violence erupted.

At the end of World War I, 93% of the inhabitants of Palestine were Arabs. By 1939, fully 28% were Jewish. The British plan of 1937, to divide Palestine into 3 states, one Jewish, one Arab and one mixed, met with universal condemnation. In 1939, the British sought peace by placating the Arab majority with a ban on Jewish immigration. World War II brought a temporary respite from the troubles as the disgruntled Jews allied themselves with the British against a common foe - Hitler.

After the war, the Arab League was formed, having as one of its goals resistance to the creation of a Jewish state in the region. Arab violence, including the sabotage of oil pipelines, was intended to demonstrate their determination. Jews too resorted to violence as the **Irgun** **Zwei Leumi** and the **Stern Gang** used terrorist tactics to force the British to act.

Truman, pressed by the American Zionist lobby, encouraged the British to relax immigration requirements, but Atlee's government refused. A wave of Jewish terrorism swept Palestine, with the blowing up of communication facilities and the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, killing nearly 100 people. Illegal Jewish immigration was stepped up. The British were in an intolerable position, and in 1947 announced that they were going to give up trying to handle the problem themselves, passing it on to the UNO.

Palestinian Partition and War:

The UNSCOP (UN Special Commission on Palestine) recommended a solution that mirrored the British 1937 proposals, though it was more generous to the Jews, expanding their zone into the Negev desert, to the south. Though there was no agreement on the part of the Palestinians, the British withdrew anyway, and on May 14, 1948, **David Ben-Gurion** announced the formation of the Jewish state of **Israel**. On the following day, Israel was invaded by its Arab neighbours.

From the South-West, the Egyptians advanced from Gaza. From the East came Jordan's Arab Legion. Syria and Iraq also took part in the war. The British trained and equipped Jewish defense force, the **Haganah** resisted desperately. Divided and poorly equipped, the Arabs had little success. When the war ended, by February 1949, the Jews had successfully driven the Egyptians out, but faced a stalemate in the East, having lost much of Jerusalem.

The ultimate outcome of the war was the loss of a Palestinian homeland, with Egypt retaining the Gaza strip and Jordan holding the West Bank area. A million Palestinians were refugees in neighbouring countries. Their displacement intensified Arab resentment. The Arab states did little to alleviate the distress of the Palestinians, while those Arabs who remained in the new state of Israel found themselves powerless second class citizens in their own homeland. The Arabs did not accept the war's result as final. For its part, Israel declared itself a Jewish homeland, opening its borders to Jews from any nation.

The Suez Crisis:

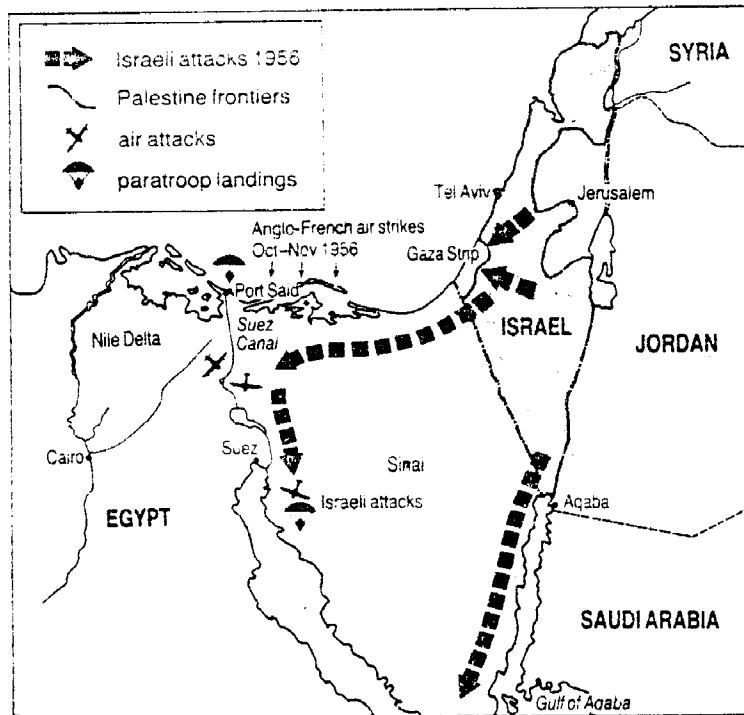
This was a complex problem, rooted not only in the Arab-Israeli dispute, but also in Arab nationalism and European imperialism and cold war politics.

- Nasser (who came to power in 1954, soon after the overthrow of the unpopular and incompetent King Farouk) sought to unite Arabs in the cause of pan-Arabism and Palestinian liberation. To this end he organized guerilla groups called the **fedayeen** (self-sacrificers) to launch terrorist attacks against Israel. He also blockaded the Gulf of Aqaba, cutting off trade to the Israeli port of Eilat.
- He also sought to unite his country by fostering nationalist opposition to the continued British presence in the Suez Canal Zone. He insisted that Britain abandon its base at Suez when the 1936 agreement expired in 1956. He further angered the British by opposing the British-sponsored Baghdad Pact and by pressuring King Hussein of Jordan to dismiss his British Chief of Staff - **Sir John Glubb** (Glubb Pasha).
- He also angered the French by encouraging Arab nationalism in Algeria.
- In late 1955 Nasser shocked the West by signing an arms deal with Czechoslovakia, buying second-hand Russian equipment - planes, tanks and small arms. In 1956, the Americans sought to force him into abandoning his new Soviet ties by cancelling a \$56 million loan to be used in constructing Nasser's pet project, the Aswan dam, which would provide power for industrializing the country while controlling the Nile floods.
- Nasser upped the stakes by announcing the nationalization of the Suez Canal, so as to secure funding for dam construction. Though compensation was promised to share holders in the Canal, the British and French governments were convinced that Nasser was bent on forming a pro-communist, anti-western, pan-Arab state in the Middle East. This might threaten the flow of oil supplies to Europe, so it was considered intolerable. Abba Eban, an Israeli official at the time, noted that Britain and France "believed, with exaggeration, that it [the canal] was their jugular vein. How could they maintain

their prosperity without it? In Egyptian hands it would be a weapon of extortion."

- United in opposition to Nasser, the British, French and Israelis opened secret negotiations to formulate a plan to bring down the Egyptian leader. British Prime Minister Anthony Eden regarded Nasser's Philosophy of the Revolution paralleling Hitler's Mein Kampf, a blueprint for foreign conquest. Eden denied any collusion with the Israelis, but later Pineau, who had been the French Foreign Minister at the time, confirmed that Eden had lied.
- On October 29, 1956, the Israelis began operations against Egypt, their forces striking deeply into the Sinai peninsula, after seizing the Gaza Strip.
- The U.S. proposed a cease fire in the UN Security Council, but the British and French vetoed it. Claiming to be solely interested in protecting the canal, they then sent both sides an ultimatum, calling upon them to withdraw from the canal's vicinity. British and French bombers attacked Egyptian airfields on October 31, and on November 5, Anglo-French forces were landed at Port Said.
- Nasser called for UN help and also blocked the canal by sinking block-ships in it.
- The Soviet Union went further, threatening nuclear attacks on the aggressor nations. Though the Americans made it known that they would not tolerate an attack on Paris or London, the Israelis were given no such assurance. (The crisis could not have come at a better time for the U.S.S.R., as it was, at that very time, engaged in putting down the Hungarian uprising.
- The U.S. and the U.S.S.R. were united in their opposition to the Franco-British action, and with the support of most of the UN's member states, called for an end to hostilities and the withdrawal of British, French and Israeli troops. The U.S., which had handled the Middle East problem very badly before the outbreak of hostilities (fearing that any actions taken might hurt Eisenhower in the American Presidential elections), now faced the very real possibility of the Soviet Union expanding the conflict.
- A UN plan called for the placement of UN forces to police Israeli-Egyptian frontier, helping to reduce the fedayeen threat to Israel and to protect the canal. With this face-saving measure, the aggressors withdrew - the Israelis taking care to destroy Egyptian military installations in the Gaza Strip and Sinai before returning to their 1948 frontier. In addition, the Egyptian blockade of the Gulf of Aqaba was not resumed, thus, only the Israeli's gained anything from the conflict.

The Suez War



-Far from humiliating Nasser and causing his downfall, the British and French merely added to his prestige in the Arab world. The reduction of Arab oil shipments to Europe made gasoline rationing necessary for a time. The pro-British Premier of Iraq, Nuri-es-Said now faced great opposition and was murdered in 1958. The French position in Algeria was further undermined, and independence achieved in 1962.

-Nasser became a great celebrity in the Arab world, with supporters throughout the Arab world. Pan-Arabism received a great boost. In 1958 Syria joined with Egypt in the **United Arab Republic**, with Nasser as President. The experiment did not last, however, as Egyptian domination was resented by the Syrians. Nasser continued to seek greater Arab integration though, assisting anti-monarchist forces in the Yemen - where a civil war raged for years.

-The U.S.S.R. gained enormously from its assistance to Egypt. For the first time, it had a client state in the Middle East, compensating it for its loss of influence in Iran after the end of the Second World War.