

# Indigenous People & Emerging Nationalism

## Pre-1948

The Palestinian people are today at a point of flux. More than a century after Imperial Britain promised Palestine to the Zionist movement for the creation of a Jewish home, Palestinians remain geographically divided between those who were able to remain in their homeland and those forcibly dispersed all over the world. Over the course of this century, the Palestinian struggle has taken many forms, evolving in response to global developments and to the realities on the ground. At its core, however, Palestinians have consistently called for one thing: ending the denial of Palestinian individual and collective rights. A century after the 1917 Balfour Declaration, it appears that the Palestinians are on the cusp of a new phase in their struggle. To understand this new moment, it is important to first take stock of the Palestinian question, consider its history, and identify ways in which it can be resolved.



Palestinian children In Gaza Playing (Photography by Hosam Salem)



Protests in the West Bank (Photograph by Mohammad Badarneh)

## 1880–1915

Arab Palestinian consciousness can be traced back to the mid-to-late 19th century, when Palestine was a densely populated province of the Ottoman Empire. From that time, Palestinians began developing a distinct identity linked to land, which they had toiled for centuries, as well as cultural traditions associated to language, dress, music and cuisine. As the Ottoman Empire tattered on the edge of collapse, at the turn of the 20th century, and with nationalism expanding its foray into the region, the Palestinian identity slowly began to manifest itself in nationalist terms, a process that was accelerated by the emergence of Zionism.



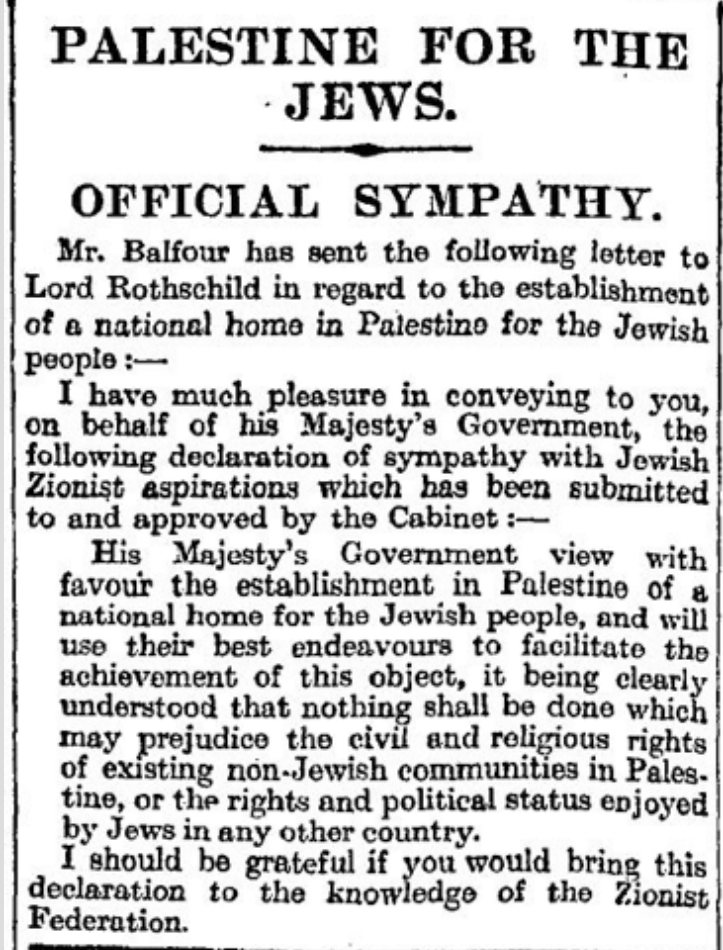
Palestinian Women Dancing in Bethlehem, 1936, From Matson (G. Eric & Edith)

## 1917

Responding to persistent anti-Semitism in Europe, Zionism had emerged at the turn of the 20th century as a political movement calling for the creation of a safe haven for the Jewish people, away from the past and anticipated horrors of European discrimination and oppression. For various strategic and ideological reasons, British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour acquiesced to this demand, announcing British support for "a Jewish national home in Palestine" in the Balfour Declaration and lending the substantial weight of the British Empire to realizing the aims of the political Zionist project.



A Bedouin Woman in Jerusalem, 1898-1914



Balfour Declaration in The Times of London, November 9th, 1917

## 1922

This was a time of rampant colonialism, one in which the wishes of the peoples of the Third World rarely featured into the decisions of the great powers due to the prevalent racist attitudes towards non-European peoples as slow to develop national aspirations. Palestinians were no exception. While the British Empire supported the Zionist aspiration to ensure that the Jewish community be regarded as a people deserving of a homeland, the indigenous people in Palestine were not seen as worthy of peoplehood.

After the end of the First World War, the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire were carved up and placed under the control of the victorious European powers. Under the League of Nations, the British were given a Mandate over Palestine in 1922. Although ostensibly the Mandate was created to prepare the indigenous Palestinians for eventual self-rule, it simultaneously encompassed within it the Balfour Declaration, which the British had endorsed. Consequently, the British actively denied the indigenous Palestinians the ability to exercise their right to rule themselves over their land, and enabled waves of Zionist immigration into Palestine over the following three decades. Jewish migrants began settling the territories and displacing local inhabitants. Palestinians staged multiple revolts in opposition to Zionist aspirations in Palestine, persistently lobbying for their right to nationhood and calling on the British to respect their obligations as a mandatory power, and the consequent responsibility of preparing Palestinians for self-rule, to no avail.



"Ottoman Surrender of Jerusalem, 1917"



Women's Congress Delegation of Palestinian Arab Women who visited the British High Commissioner, October 1929



Palestinian Delegation at a Protest Gathering in the Rawdat El Maaref Hall, 1929

## 1936–1939

As the Zionist project expanded in Palestine, Jewish settlers began laying the groundwork for their own national project, establishing institutions to promote Jewish - over Arab - labour, purchase Palestinian land, and invest in armed militias. Palestinian opposition peaked with the Arab Revolt of 1936–39. Over the course of four years, the revolt involved numerous strikes and protests, including one of the longest general strikes in history (around 6 months). The British mandate forces, together with armed Zionist militias, brutally crushed the protesters. The scale of the British response, which included a significant upsurge of military arms, decimated the Palestinian opposition and its military capacity. Many prominent voices and political leaders were exiled or killed, and the Palestinians were left weakened for decades.



Protests inside Jaffa Gate in the Old City of Jerusalem Against the British Mandate, 1936



Remnants of British bombing in Jenin, September 1938